

Paharpur, Pandua And Bishnupur: Search For Architecture Commonality In Bengal

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to search for Architectural commonality for a period from Seventh to Seventeenth Century CE in the region of Bengal. The region 'Bengal' is used with reference to the present West Bengal and the country of Bangladesh. We explore both the domestic and Monumental Architecture that were built in this region. Three different geographical sites of Paharpur, Pandua and Bishnupur are selected within the Bengal region, of different periods and with a different religious dominance to search a commonality in Architecture. The site of Paharpur (Seventh -Twelfth Century CE) lies currently in Bangladesh and was once a flourishing Buddhist monastery. The site of Padua currently in Malda district of West Bengal, India was the capital of Bengal Sultanate (Twelfth Century-Sixteenth Century CE). The site of Bishnupur lies in Bankura district of West Bengal, India and is known as temple town dotted with a large number of temples, popularly referred as Bengal style temples. This paper explores the bonding thread of Architecture that kept the culture alive in Bengal during these periods of transition. Later on we discuss about the new temple architecture that evolved in Bengal which developed in a syncretic way. We also try to correlate other similar transformation in the sub-continent where the form and construction in visual form was transformed while experimenting with different material.

Key words- Bengal, Temple, Buddhism, Sultanate, Ratna, Chala

1. INTRODUCTION

Greater Bengal (comprising West Bengal state of India and the country of Bangladesh) is the vast plains and delta of lower Ganga and Brahmaputra. (Jones, 2011). The land is highly fertile and the climate is warm and humid (National Building Code, 2005) with plenty of rainfall (Avg. annual rainfall is 1851.4mm) (Guhathakurta, Khedikar, Menon, & al., 2020). Lower Bengal harvests three crop a year, scanty pulse crop in spring, and two crop of rice, once in autumn and the great rice crop which is harvested in December (Hunter, 1868). The geographical location gives it an easy access to world trade through sea (Bay of Bengal), especially the Islamic diaspora (1300-1500CE) who were connected to Arabic Region. (Hall, 2010) Inland navigation was connected through river (Ganga/ Padma/ Brahmaputra) which linked it to entire North and East India. (Datta & Tripathy, 2001) There is one another region mentioned in popular literature known as Rarh region or Radha Bengal. Rarh region in current state of West Bengal that lies between Chota Nagpur plateau in the West and Ganga delta in the East. The districts around Murshidabad lies in this region. Northern Rarh constitutes Murshidabad, Purb-Bardhaman, Paschim-Bardhaman and Birbhum districts of West Bengal, India. Southern Rarh constitute Purb-Mednipur, Paschim-Mednipur and Bankura district of West Bengal Region. Temple town of Bishnupur lies in Bankura district of West Bengal. Varendra was the region of North Bengal which now includes the districts of Rajshahi, Pabna, Bogra, and Dinajpur of Bangladesh and West Dinajpur of India. The period from Seventh Century AD to Seventeenth Century AD covers the time span when three religious dominance is seen in Bengal. Up to Eleventh Century the region was a Buddhist dominance overtaken by Islamic Sultanate and the Mughals and later on it was a Hindu revivalism from Sixteenth Century and later on colonial influence of Great Britain. The faith changed, and we observe the transformation in Monumental Architecture. The Architecture of the common masses (domestic Architecture) is resistant to sweep changes.

While the religious identities changed, the cultural cohesion, and the vernacular form retained its spine, which is visible in these period of time. Both the Hindus and Muslims although following their hard-core faith, somewhat diluted the dogma of their religion and followed a central stream which showed a religious unification in form of 'Pir' worship (Rahman, 2008). This paper explores the popular architecture commonality of Bengal that was continuously evolving from one form to other. The methodology adopted is the historical, architectural and cultural evidences in corroboration with the political milieu of the era.

2. METHODS

The aim of the method is to search of Architectural commonality for a definite period of time in Bengal. The methodology adopted is literature survey along with thematic analysis. Whole period of Seventh Century to Seventeenth Century CE is divided into three periods based on popular culture. The period of Buddhism dated from Seventh Century to invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1204 is the first period in our study. The second period is Islamic rule governed from Delhi Sultanate to Independent Bengal Sultans, till 1576 CE. The third is the period of Mughals and Nawab's from 1576 to 1757 CE when finally East India Company took powers in hand. Study of political transition was essential to study and deeply understand the prevailing culture, syncretism, feudalism, along with trade and town development which was translated and preserved for the current generation in the form to be studied through epigraphy, iconography, architecture, archaeology and many other traits that are carried by generations.

3. DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE IN BENGAL

An old saying in Bangladesh is "Ducks in the East and Bamboo in the West". (Haq, 1994) It means the water body in the form of river, stream or pond should be in East direction so that the air coming from East and South-East direction is cooled before entering the house. Placing bamboo groves in the West direction will resist the westerly hot and dry wind. It will also protect the house from harsh Sun of the West.

In Bengal the dwelling units (huts) are clustered around a courtyard. The courtyard is a social space used during festivals, and helps in maintaining a cordial relation among the residents. The house has an outer formal zone known as '*baithak*' and inner informal zone as living and sleeping space with kitchen and toilets. All the spaces except the '*baithak*' are oriented towards the courtyard and are surrounded by covered verandahs. (Ray & Shaw, 2017) The plan of the huts is either square or rectangular with just one room for the poor and multiple rooms for the affluent. Walls are of woven bamboo battens with thatch or reeds sandwiched inside to fill the gaps. Occasionally mud plaster is done from both inside and outside. The roofing material is thatch over bamboo batten. *Do chala* roof are in two segments sloping down the ridge while *char-chala* roofs are in four segments (hip roof) without the gable.

Regarding *chala* roof Andreas Volwahren in his book 'Living Architecture: Islamic Indian', remarks "... [it was] a type of roof which gave the impression that all its planes were curved. The ridges and eaves were upturned; also the bamboo rafter placed perpendicular to the ridges was curved." (Volwahren, 1970)

Basic archetypical character of Bengal Vernacular architecture include plinth above highest flood level, open plan, ventilation due to warm and humid climate, rain repelling wall and roof, application of local available material that is pre-requisite for Vernacular Architecture. A responsive *Bhita* (site), *Bera* (wall enclosure), *Chala* (Roof) and *Uthan* (Courtyard) are the archetypical evolution in Bengal delta. (Tabassum, 2019)

4. MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE OF BENGAL (BUDDHISM)

The Buddhist influence is remarkably visible in this region under Mauryan Empire (c.324 BC- 187 BC) which was greatly strengthened later by Gupta (320 CE- 570 CE), Pala rulers (750 CE-1205 CE) and the Senas (1096 CE - 1225CE). The sites of Nalanda (during Gupta rule) and Vikramshila (during Pal rule) were once the flourishing Universities which is now lying in state of Bihar, India. The site at Paharpur and Mainamati (during Pal and Sena Rule) which were Buddhist Monasteries are now in Bangladesh. The source of information is the archaeological findings and the writings of Chinese travelers who visited these sites.

Brick is the predominant building material used for monumental construction in this region of Bihar and Bengal. It was used to construct great universities of Nalanda (c. Third Century CE to Thirteenth century CE) and Vikramshila (c. 900CE-1100CE), both medieval sites are located in the current state of Bihar. Paharpur and Mainamati (Eighth -Twelfth Century CE) Buddhist sites are all having brick structures. Although first cave excavation for human habitation in India was done at Lomas Rishi (also known as Barabar) caves (322-185 B.C.), Jahanabad, Bihar, the use of stone as building material is very limited in Bihar/Bengal in medieval ages. When the first mosque of stone was made in this region it was named 'Pather ki Masjid' (A mosque made of stone) at Patna. It was built by Parviz Mirza, son of Jehangir in 1621. Timber was second predominant material after brick. It was used for construction of flat roof laid with bricks. Such construction is evident from Universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila.

Sompura Vihar (Paharpur, Rajshahi district, Bangladesh) is cruciform in Plan. It got patronage under Pala Kings. Terracotta plaques have been in use as is evident from the Buddhist site of Paharpur and Mainamati (Eighth-Twelfth Century CE) sites. It is established that the sculpture that were in Pala rule were continuation of Gupta rule, but in Architecture the transformation from square plan to mature cruciform plan (Paharpur Monastery) would have gone through a morphological evolution. (Reza, 2012) The monastery is quadrangle in shape, each side measuring 822 ft. It was flanked by a boundary wall 12 ft. high. In plan it consists of rows of cells on each side with a verandah of 8ft. to 9ft. wide. Total number of cells is 177 excluding the central cell. Paharpur Monastery was the most mature monastery surpassing all others. The Architectural work would have been achieved by applying heuristic model with adaptation, alteration, rejection, before coming up with an accepted model. (Saha, 2005)

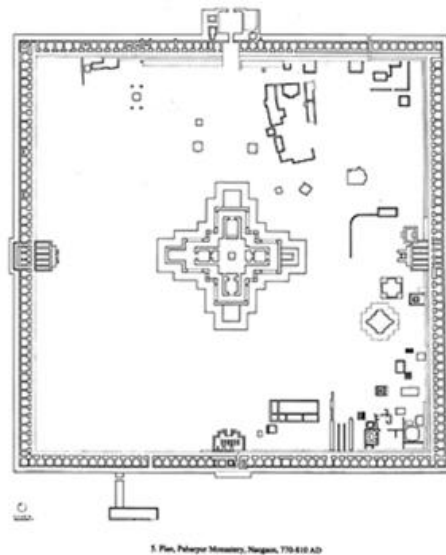


Figure 1: Site Plan of Paharpur Monastery showing cruciform plan of Monastery.
Source: <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Paharpur> accessed on 19/10/2021.

Copper plate recovered from ruins of Nalanda University mentions that the Sompura Monastery was attacked by Varman rulers and was set on fire killing the chief Monk. Tibetan sources mention the Islamic invaders destroyed the Monastery in first half of Thirteenth Century (Laha, 2015). So there is a conflict in the source of information about the actual cause of destruction of Nalanda University. Whatever be the reason of decline of these edifice of learning, the fall of these universities and Monasteries also gave a big blow to the Buddhism.

The terracotta sculptures on the basement of Paharpur Monastery temple depict the events of life of Krishna. So we observe that both Hinduism and Buddhism had a cordial co-existence. Vaishnavism cult was propagated by Sena rulers. Sena rulers were Brahman's from Karnataka who took over Pala's. Sena rulers were hostile to Buddhism and it (Buddhism) began to decline. It is worth mentioning that, the terracotta art was not new to this region. Several terracotta findings were revealed from excavations which are testimony of not only the settlement in the region, but also proclaim the popular belief and culture of that period. Excavation of town of Chandraketugarh which is currently located in the district of North 24- Pargana, West Bengal, India shows the remains of terracotta art. This city flourished from circa Sixth to Seventh Century BC and up to Pala Period (Chakraborty, 1998-99). We discuss about terracotta plaques which were the cottage industry and had wide application in monumental buildings. These plaques were produced by the *kumbhkars* (potters) who were crafted in making artefacts from mud. Remains of terracotta figurine (group of plaques, circa Second Century B.C.) which are observed from historic city of Chandraketugarh site in North 24- Pargana, West Bengal show cult or ritual associated with fertility (Chowdhury, 1999). These were the charms for expectant mothers or those already having children. Ibid. This finding is an indication of terracotta art in the pre Christian era in Bengal region.

Thirty terracotta plaques were recovered from excavation site of (Shalban Vihar) Mainamati., close to Paharpur site in Bangladesh. The excavations were carried under guidance of Habibur Rehman, Department of Archaeology and Museum of Bangladesh in 1984. Size of Plaque varies from (14 cm× 11 cm× 9 cm) to (35 cm× 28 cm× 13 cm). Medium size plaque (25 cm× 9 cm× 7 cm) are more in number (Alam, 1992). The subject matter of plaque portrays human figures, divine and semi divine figures, *gandharbhs*, birds, fishes, beasts, flowers and many other day to day conceivable objects. Within the site at a different location the plaques are of Buddha, *Shivalinga*, wheels, celestial figures, *gandharva*, *kinnars*, warriors, face of lion, vegetables like pumpkin etc.

Here we would like to mention a special plaque which was excavated from Paharpur site and aroused interest is a 'head offering' depiction where a man is holding his head from left hand and inserting a sword in his throat as if in the act of striking. Offering one's own blood is prevalent in *Sakta* cult, and head offering is mentioned in various Purans. One of them is Uttar Kandin Ramayan where Ravan's austerity is proved along with his brother Kuber (Ghosal, 1939).

These plaques provide the information regarding early life and culture in Bengal which are not available in literature form. Acharya (Teacher) and *Sutradhar* (Craftsman) worked together to give a final shape to the art (Mangaonkar, 2012). Acharya were the learned person who used to recite the stories from the Vedas and Upnishads and these were crafted by the illiterate craftsman in the four available material forms i.e. *kastha* (wood), *mittika* (mud), *chitra* (painting), and *pashan* (stone). The artists not only derived inspirations from *Shilp Shastras* regarding standardization but the observation from daily life were also the subject matter in their art work. Ibid.

The religious coherence between Buddhism and Hinduism (Vaishnavism/ Shivaism) was not always amicable. The

existence of Bodh Gaya (the highest seat of Buddhism) and Gaya in close proximity of 10km has a longer tales to tell. The Chinese pilgrim monk Xuanzang mentions the cutting of Bodhi tree and installing of Mahesvara statue by removing Buddha's statue from Mahabodhi temple in early Seventh Century during the reign of Sasank (Si-Yu-Ki, 1958).

Special reference is to be made of a medieval port city of Tamralipta also known as Tamluk on the bank of Ganga (Padma). This port city was gateway for voyage to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Indonesia. Vast hydrological changes created by Ganga delta have distorted the entire geographical existence of the site in last one thousand years (Sengupta, 2011). The location of Tamralipati as mentioned by Hiuen Tsang is 50 *yojnas* east to city of Champa. Some literature mentions it as the port that was trading '*tamra*' which means copper. The nearest mines of Singhbhum has huge deposit of copper in Jharkhand (Get Bengal, Thinking Positive, 2021)

5. MEDIEVAL ARCHITECTURE OF BENGAL (THE SULTANATE RULE)

The Indian subcontinent has witnessed the peak of Amravati, The Gupta's, the Pallav's and The Pala's in the first half of medieval era (Wales, 1948). Second Battle of Terrain of 1192 CE fought between Prithvi Raj Chauhan and Mohammad Ghori opened up the entire subcontinent for a foreign rule that was quite opposite in culture and belief. The Islamic invasion witnessed an iconoclastic disaster in the entire Indian subcontinent. It became instrument of cultural hegemony subordinating the popular faith and belief of people. In this region (Bengal/Bihar) the University of Nalanda was ravaged by Ikhtiyar-uddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji (c.1200 CE). Monks were killed and manuscripts and books burnt. He established Lakhnauti (Gaur) as its capital in 1203 CE. Nadia was captured in 1204 CE. With the decline of Pal and Sena dynasty and rise of Islam, Buddhism was uprooted from this region. Now came the movement with a religious zeal that was in a mission of proselytizing the masses. The new dynastic rule were from Central Asia (Turks) and Afghanistan. Islamic buildings and structures that were built include mosque, mausoleums, forts, gateways, *hammam-khanas*, towers and *idgahs*. (George, 1984). Initial formative period of Islamic rule during Sultanate period (Turks/ Afghans) provided a backdrop of religious conversion, which was executed during Mughal rule of Bengal in Sixteenth Century (Dasgupta, 2004).

Sultanate rule (Fourteenth-Sixteenth Century) of Bengal presented the largest among all, 'The Adina Mosque' (1370 CE) at Padua (modelled on the principles of Great Mosque of Damascus) the finest architectural marvel of Islamic era in this region. It was also recognised as a true congregational mosque in India. It was partly stone and partly brick work with vaulted roof and several small domes. The grandiose of Adina mosque was symbolism of excessive ambition and self-exaltation. (Sanyal, 1970). Early Sultanate ruler did not absorb the culture of Bengal because of their foreign origin. Adina mosque was never of local origin in the form except that it was made from the debris of broken temple and Buddhist structures. The terracotta work on the tympana of finely chiseled black basalt *Mihrab* is astonishing. The finest among them is the palm tree which emerges from the vase set in panel (Waez, 2007). Although the plan never represented the Bengal style, but the exterior was fully clad with terracotta giving it a Bengal touch.

Here it is important to narrate an incidence of Islamic conversion. During a brief period from (1415- 1418 CE) a Hindu *zamindar* (named as Kans) gained power and occupied the throne of Pandua. He slain many Islamic learned and holy men. Seeing this atrocities on Islam a saint Nur-Qutb-Alam intimidated the strong kingdom of Jaunpur Sultan Ibrahim Sharqui to save Islam. Knowing this and visualising the power of Jaunpur Sultanate, Kans pleaded the saint to retreat the strong Jaunpur army and begged forgiveness. Visioning the opportunity the saint told Kans to embrace Islam. Kans brought his twelve year son Jadu to saint Nur-Qutb-Alam and converted him to Islam with name of Jalal-ud-din and declared him King (Majumdar, 1968). From the literature it is not clear whether Kans converted himself or not. The period of Alauddin Husain Shah (1494–1519 CE) is regarded as a golden period in Bengal for his liberalism and tolerance toward the Hindu population. Muslim population of Bengal constitute two composite identities- one is the original Muslim migrants of Turks, Persian of Afghanistan origin and the other is converted ones. (Elius, Khan, Roslan, & Muneem, 2020)

Although several mosque and mausoleum were constructed during Sultanate rule of Bengal, we are discussing about three structures, *Eklakhi* Mausoleum, Qadm Rasul Mosque and tomb of Fateh Khan because of their unique architectural characteristics that shaped the architecture of Bengal. *Eklakhi* Mausoleum (1425) at Hazrat Pandua in Malda district (West Bengal, India) is considered as the first Islamic building in Bengal Style (Hasan P., 1989). This mausoleum has a marked architectural character, with unique style which is regarded as a prototype of further Islamic structure built in this region (Brown, 1942). The name is derived from the amount of money (Ek Lakh- One hundred thousand) incurred in making this tomb. This type of nomenclature is still common in Bihar and Bengal region.

Many *nau-lakha* (Nine hundred thousand) temple by its 'name' exist in this region. *Nau-lakha* temple is at Deoghar, Jharkhand and *Naulakha* building at Bhagalpur, Bihar now houses the Government run Medical College. Several '*naulakha*' temple is dotted in Sonapur and Danapur in Patna, Bihar. Another temple with the same name exist in Rajgir, Bihar. In Lahore fort it is *Naulakha* pavilion where guests used to stay.

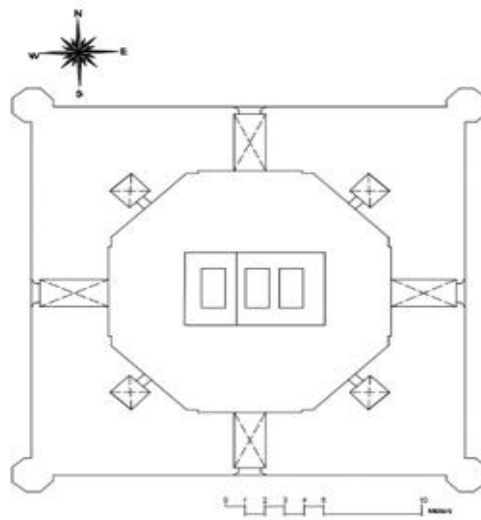


Figure 2:- Plan of Eklakhi Mausoleum
Source:- Drawing by Author



Figure 3 Eklakhi Mausoleum.

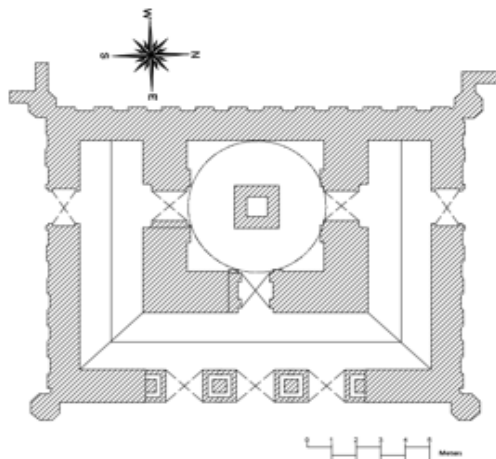


Figure 4 Plan of Qadam Rasul Mosque, drawing by Author

Eklakhi mausoleum (1425 CE) provides the model for subsequent development as stated, not only for Islamic building in the region of Bengal but also the Hindu Buildings. This building is in brick, with square plan and single dome. Wall thickness is 4m (13 ft) and has an octagonal interior to construct the dome over it. The mausoleum is 75 ft in length and height is 25 ft. Curved cornice and terracotta decoration is the additional feature which was later adopted in both Islamic and Hindu buildings of Bengal. Eklakhi tomb has glazed tiles used on its surface along with terracotta. During Sultanate era glazed tiles were adopted in Central Province (Mandu) and Gaur- Pandua in Bengal (Chatterjee, 1994). ‘Eklakhi’ style with single dome prototype was the epitome of cost effective construction and the approach of minimalist. (Tariq & Jinia, 2013)

Here it is important to discuss about architectural syncretism in another mosque (Qadam Rasul Mosque, 1530 CE) which was built about hundred years later than Eklakhi mausoleum (1425 CE) that has not only deviated in architectural plan form but also the worshipping style. Literal meaning of Qadam is the lower limb ‘feet’. Qadam Rasul Mosque, Gaur, West Bengal, India (1530 CE) was built by Sultan Nushrat Sah to enshrine a stone

impression of Prophet's foot. This type of symbolism is not common in Islam, but in Hinduism it is frequently found as the foot worship of Vishnu as is evident in Vishnupad temple of Gaya, Bihar, India. Foot worship is also common in Jain religion. Qadam Rasul is a small non-congregational mosque with a central space having the impression 'foot' of Prophet Mohammad (over a carved pedestal of black stone) with a dome over it (the relic was taken to Murshidabad in seventeenth century). Although the proto-type plan of Qadam Rasul Mosque was adopted in regional Temple construction, the Muslims retained the Imperial style once Mughal entered Bengal. Despite that the Sultans were foreigners they supported the local culture and craftsman and the Islam practised by the Bengali Muslims were more syncretized that adapted the folk tradition that was different from Islam of the west. (Hasan P. , 1993) The long term isolation of Bengal from Delhi Sultanate and the involvement with local culture tends to observe a modified form of Islamic religion in this region.

Qadam Rasul Mosque has three sides covered and enclosed vaulted verandah and there is no verandah on Qibla wall side (West). There is no mihrab in this mosque. Outer façade of the mosque is decorated with rectangular terracotta tiles with the relics of mihrab over it and a hanging bell in the centre. This mosque plan is in similar to a Hindu temple plan with small central sanctum with restricted entry.

Entrance is through East with three arched opening with thick Bengal style brick column. Iconic worship (here foot impression) is not common in Islam as they practice aniconic method of worship where *Qibla* is directional analogy of Kaba in Mecca of Saudi Arabia. Qadam Rasul Mosque is an example of fusion between Hindu and Islamic culture and Architecture.

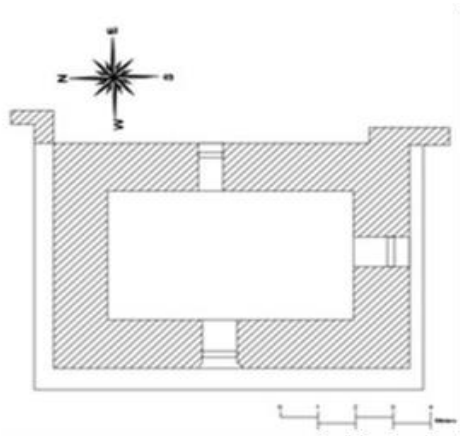


Figure 5: Plan of Fatah Khan tomb drawn by Author

The earliest transformation of chala roof from thatch and bamboo to brick and mortar is not established. The earliest surviving *chala* roof seen in Islamic building is tomb of Fatah Khan at Gaur (c.1657 CE). During the same period several temples were built using the same (*chala*) roof style as is observed in Shyama Rai Temple (1643) and Jor Bangla (1655 CE). Fatah Khan was elder son of Aurungzeb's general, Diler Khan who was dispatched to subdue Shah Suza (younger brother of Aurungzeb) in Bengal.

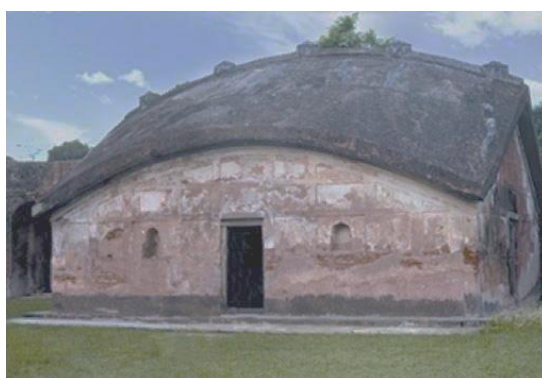


Figure 6: Photo of Fatah Khan tomb

Legends says that, as soon as he reached the city of Gaur, Fatah Khan vomited blood and died. Chala, a gable roof is epitome of huts of Bengal made from bamboo and thatch. The ridge of the roof is not linear, but it has taken curvilinear shape because of cantilever projection of bamboo. Secondly the roof have the dropping eaves, as if the cantilevered projection has bent down due to gravity and aging. Such unique mimicry of tensile bamboo-thatch structure (huts) to get a form, from the rigid materials of brick and lime is the sensitivity shown towards local form of vernacular Bengal Architecture. It is the transition from 'order of the bamboo' to the 'order of the brick' which Louis I Kahn used to say 'a

curvilinear distortion of Euclidian grid' (Damisch, 2009). If we search for non-planar curved roof we observe it in monolithic rock cut 'Panch- Rathas' at Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu (Seventh Century CE). These are World Heritage Sites listed by UNESCO and clubbed under 'Group of Monuments at Mahabalipuram.'

Fatah Khan Mausoleum exhibit the chala roof wonderfully done over a rectangular plan. It has dochala with gable ends and the mausoleum has three openings. Curved cornice, with terracotta plaques and occasional niches in the façade are features which were later visible in Bishnupur style temples. It's not that only Islamic buildings were built under Sultanate rule. Fewer temples were built during the Sultanate or early Mughal period (1352-1576 CE) in the Rarh region (mostly Bankura district) which are compiled from 'The Bengal Circle Report' 1910-11 CE, and are listed below.

1. Shanresvara Temple at Dihar, Bankura (1335 CE)
2. Shantinath Temple at Sihar, Kotulpur block, Bankura by Jagathnath Malla (1309 CE)
3. Jagganath Temple in Bishnupur, Thakurpara by Patit Malla (1449 CE)
4. Dasabhuj Temple in Bishnupur, Kamarpara by Chandra Malla (1529 CE)
5. Gopala Temple at Banki village in Bankura district by Bir Malla (1545 CE)
6. Ektesvara Temple in Bankura district by Bir Malla (1545 CE)

It is imperative to discuss the genesis of the popular cult that gave rise to temples, mostly dedicated to Radha-Krishna in Bengal. Vaishnavism gained some ground in Bengal earlier during Sena rulers (CE1100-1226). Sena rulers were orthodox Hindus from Deccan (Karnataka) and they imposed stringent caste system (Rehman, 1995). Buddhist was oppressed during this rule. In the twelfth century *Geeta- govinda* was composed by Jayadev. It describes the relationship between Krishna, Radha and the gopikas. The emergence of Bhakti movement led by Sri Chaitanya (1486-1533CE) and later by Sri Niwas gave impetus for the temple revival in Bengal. (Chakravarti, 1977) At the same period there was religious tolerance under the rule of Husain Sah (1493-1533 CE) (McCutchion, 1972). Temple building revived in Bengal after a gap of 250 years (Sanyal, 1970). Bishnupur in Bankura district of Bengal emerged as a temple town. Around thirty important temples were constructed in 15th-16th Century. These sequential events developed a Vaishnavism cult dedicated to Radha-Krishna among the masses which are depicted in the terracotta art work. (Ibid.)

6. MUGHAL RULE IN BENGAL AND LATER DEVELOPMENT

Akbar (Mughal) annexed Bengal Sultanate (1572-76 CE) by defeating Sulaiman Karrani and established one among twelve 'subah' known as Bengal *Subah*. It was the largest subdivision of Mughal Empire. The significant Islamic building built during Mughal era in this region is the Sat-Gumbaj Mosque (Seven domed Mosque) in Dhaka (second half of Seventeenth Century) along the bank of buri Ganga. This mosque is small in scale and cannot match the grandeur of Adina Mosque (Khondker, 2019).The remoteness of Mughal capital city (Delhi/Agra) from Bengal gave an opportunity for the local non- Muslim (Hindu) inhabitants to restore the religious practices and construct their place of worship.

Prominent temples were built during Seventeenth Century- Eighteenth Century CE in this region that was a totally new distinctive style and can be called as 'Bengal Style'. Important temples are listed in the proceeding table.

S. No.	Name	Year of Construction	Remarks
1	Shyam Rai Temple	1643	Nav Ratna temple
2	Keshta Raya Temple	1655	Jor Bangla
3	Kala Chand Temple	1656	
4	Lalji Temple	1658	
5	Madan Gopal and Murli Mohan Temple	1665	
6	Radha Binod Temple	1659	Eight chala temple
7	Madan Mohan Temple	1694	Ek-Ratna
8	Radha Govind Temple	1729	Ek-Ratna
9	Radha Madhav Temple	1737	
10	Radha Shyam Temple	1758	

Table 1 Major Temple built during Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century in Bengal region

Two remarkably, visible prominent temple architecture features of Seventeenth - Eighteenth Century Bengal (Bishnupur, Bankura district, West Bengal, India) that was already visible earlier and was adopted as influenced by Islamic Architecture are the non-planar roof chala in vernacular parlance of Bengal region which has a contemporary existence as that in Fateh Khan Tomb (late Seventeenth Century), and the 'ratna' which are modified 'shikhara' of the north Indian temple architecture. 'Ratna' means the jewel that has adorned the temples of Bengal during 16th-17th century. *Ratnas* are arranged in quincunx pattern at the corners. There could be a single *ratna* at the centre (Madan Mohan Temple ek- ratna) or several *ratna's* clubbed together. The present available literature does not give the sequential transformation of predominant *Nagara* style shikhara to ratna found in the temples of Sixteenth - Seventeenth Century architecture of Bengal.

Another feature that is in continuum is the terracotta plaque cladding over the surface of the wall. The iconography on the terracotta plaques are testimony of popular culture of Bengal preserved by baked soil by the local artisans of *Kumbhkar* community. These iconography reveal the socio-religious, politico- economic situation from Sixteenth to Nineteenth century. (Pal, 2021) It depicts the stories from epics of Ramayana/ Mahabharat and Purans. The Bengali artists preferred the Bengali version of Ramayana (Ramer Panchali) by Krittivas Ojha, and Kashidasi Mahabharata, the Bengali version of Mahabharata, by Kashiram Das. Ibid.

RadhaGovind temple (1729) is a square structure built on raised platform (raised platform is known as Jagati in Nagara Style Temple). Total height of the temple is 10.7 m. The author identifies the ratna of Radha Govind Temple as a *shikhara*. The dome of the ratna (shikhara) is placed over a cylindrical drum rising above the chala roof. The shikhara has a distinct amalaka and the kalasha finial.

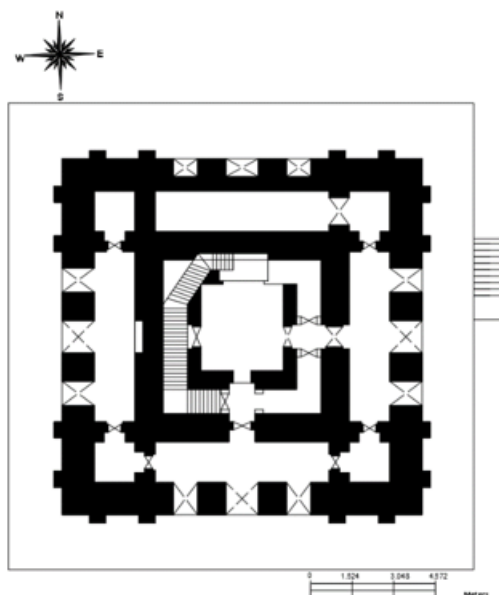


Figure 7 Plan of RadhaGovind Temple, drawing by Author

Calling this *shikhara* as ratna does not justify the temple classification based on Nagara style or even the Rekha deul of Orissa style. If this *shikhara* is viewed in isolation from a far off distance, it resembles a temple in itself placed over a raised platform over chala roof. Lower sanctum of the temple was conceptualized from the contemporary Islamic mosque and mausoleum with the curved cornice, thick brick wall and upper portion is the form taken from rekha deul (Orissa style) (Guha & Bandyopadhyay, 2017) There is also an entrance gate in the shikhara. Radha Govind temple can aptly be said as "Rekha deul sitting over a chala roof".



Figure 8 Photo of RadhaGovind Temple

Pika Ghose a notable historian in her book 'Temple to Love- Architecture and devotion in Seventeenth- century Bengal' has rejected the numbering system of one, five or nine ratna. Instead Ghosh used ratna for a distinct temple type. She writes that the word 'nav' is both nine and new and the historians picked nine to denote nine ratnas of Shyama Rai Temple. It all started with 'NavRatnaRatnam' the inscription on Shyama Rai Temple, and it was wrongly interpreted as nine ratna temple, instead it is a new temple style. (Ghose, 2005)

Jor Bangla Temple are twin Bengal structures juxtaposed sharing a common long wall. Literal meaning of 'jor' in Bangla is 'together'. Jor Bangla was built by Malla King Raghunath Singha in c.1655 CE. The front portion serves as the porch of the temple and the rear part serves as the shrine. The temple has an approximately square base of size 11.80 m × 11.48 m. Height of the temple is 10.7 m measured from the raised platform. The walls are richly decorated with terracotta panels with subject from Mahabharata and Ramayan and occasional geometric patterns. This Jor Bangla is

now the commercial symbolic representation of Bengal Architecture.

A shikhara is the pyramidal structure constructed above the garbhagriha that provides scale (height) to the temple which is visible from a far off distance. The geometrical form, material used and the surface treatment is all important for the construction of shikhara which gives identity to the temple. Above the shikhara is placed the amalaka and the finial. Multiple shikhar's exist in a same temple with different scale and dimension, but in most cases 'form' wise it is identical. In North Indian style (Nagara Style) the shikhara that towers above the main deity, is the tallest among all. Various experimentation was done in temple like Rasmanch, Dolmanch, Dalan, flat roof temples with multiple ratnas and several group of temples were built.

So, we observe that the religious and vernacular identities were conceptualised and experimented in built form to generate a new temple architecture style in Bengal during Fifteenth Century to Seventeenth Century AD adding 'ratna' as its indigenous element of architecture in this era.

7. DISCUSSION

With reference to chala roof in brick and mortar, we would like to discuss similar transformations, from early examples of Indian Architecture. The *torana* (gateways) of Sanchi Stupa (Third Century BCE) in the Raisen district of Central India is the manifestation of gateways of early *vedic* village that was made of wood. It is easier to work in wood because of its easy availability and workability as compared to stone. With the increased usage of stone in that era and the advantages of its longevity, the elegant *toranas* of Sanchi stupa were built in four cardinal directions with elaborate sculpture adorning the gateway of Sanchi Stupa. Similarly the entrance to Chaitya hall in rock cut caves of Karle, Maharashtra had the impression of barrel vaulted roof with purlins carved out of stone. Similar would have been the structure in wood which were replicated in Rock cut architecture. Another example is of Lomas Rishi Cave in Jahanabad, Bihar, and the first rock cut cave with an elegant entrance resembling the elements as if made in wood. Similar *rathas* (chariot) are depicted in the temples of Orissa as in Konark Sun temple. So the manifestation of built structure in stone derived from wooden form was popular in India. The copycat of thatch and bamboo chala roof to that in brick and mortar is just another example to maintain 'in continuum' of identity in original form.

Apart from architectural form and material commonality an important discussion that is imperative is about religious syncretism even in later period. The acceptance of form by both the Hindus and Muslims would not have been possible if the cordial thread was not woven by both the religious ideologies. Both the religion, although with diverse thought and still maintaining religious co-existence is narrated by a festival which is celebrated in Brahmanbari district of Bangladesh as birth anniversary of Manmohan Dutta (1877-1909 CE), a religious Hindu poet who was well versed with Quran and Hadith. Although Muslims claim that he converted to Islam, a mausoleum was built after his death and both Hindus and Muslims celebrate the anniversary festival every year (Togawa, 2008).

8. RESULT

We observe that the popular architecture of the common masses are resistant to political changes. The monumental architecture of Bengal showed a significant transition as the political scenario of the region changed. Within this change we try to explore the commonality in Architecture of Bengal. Application of terracotta figurine which are visible from ancient site of Chandraketugarh (Sixth Century BCE) took the form of terracotta plaque and continued in medieval era (during the rule of Pala and Sena), as is evident from the plaques of Paharpur Buddhist monastery. It continued in Sultanate Mosque and Mausoleum and later it was refined in New Temples of Bishnupur. The subject on the plaque kept changing as per the prevailing culture. We observe that the terracotta seals/plaques have the commonality since the age of Buddha and it continued till the new temple town of Bishnupur.

Early evidence of thatched roof style (chala roof) in brick and mortar is present in Shyama Rai Temple and mid Seventeenth century mausoleum (Fatah Khan). By late Seventeenth century the propagators of Gaudiya Vaishnava used extensively this form (chala roof) in temple architecture. It is difficult to assert whether it started first in Hindu building or Islamic building. It can be said that chala roof in brick and mortar was the simultaneous evolution in both Islamic and Hindu buildings during mid Seventeenth Century CE. Ratna feature of temple developed during the Mughal era in Bengal and a lot of experimentation was done in types, number and positioning of ratnas over the temple. A maximum twenty five number of ratna is seen at Lalji temple, Kalna in the district of Bardhaman, West Bengal, India. Evolution of ratna can be inferred as a syncretic development coming out of shikhara of Nagara style temple and multiple dome of mosque which evolved in Sultanate Bengal.

The material commonality observed is the usage of brick and terracotta plaque from Seventh to Seventeenth Century CE, and transformation of Chala roof from *katcha* (thatch and bamboo) to *pucca* (brick and mortar) during Mughal period. Square plan was adopted right from Buddhist Vihara, to Mosque and Mausoleum and later on with new temples of Bengal which developed during Seventeenth Century –Eighteenth Century CE.

9. CONCLUSION

While syncretism between two communities was not only confined to Architecture but also in local customs and

practices, marriages, food, superstition, and popular literature. In architecture we observe that the chala roof and terracotta clad mosque and mausoleum simultaneously existed along with the temple. A new temple style having 'ratna' evolved which can be called the manifestation of Shikhara of Nagara style temple. The chala roof of Bengal gained popularity in Mughal era and it was adopted in the gate of diwan-e-khas at Agra by Shah Jahan. It decorates the gateway of diwan-e-khas at Lahore Fort. Later in Rajasthan it became the royal symbol over the jharokha (window). The 'Bungalow' of Bengal was popularised by the British as the solution for warm and humid climate and an epitome of lavishness and is now synonymous with prosperity. If Adina Mosque (1370 CE) was the symbolic strength of Muslim Sultanate in Bengal, the temple town of Bishnupur (Seventeenth Century) was the silent evolution of Hindu Revivalism. Bengal architectural features carried a long way and many of them has become legacy of the time.

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