

**ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE PROCESS  
OF RESOURCE CREATION:  
A CASE STUDY ON TEMPLE  
TOWN BISHNUPUR, DISTRICT BANKURA,  
WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

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**Abstract**

*The prerogative of cultural geography is to analyse how space, place and landscape are shaped by culture. It focuses on people's relationship to the natural world and the modification of that natural landscape into cultural landscape. Cultural landscape is tangible outcome of the complex interaction between human groups with its own practice, preferences, values, aspirations and a natural or modified environment (Knox & Manston, 1987). This interaction is time and space specific. Thus each and every place has its own cultural identity. This identity may become a resource for the further development of that place. So is happen in case of the 'temple town' Bishnupur. Geographically it is located between 22°57'15" N to 23°12'32"N latitude and 87°31'46"E to 87°24'11"E longitude. The place significance of Bishnupur is historically rooted. It was the capital of Malla (local chieftain) dynasty. The Malla kings patronise many handloom and cottage industries including Silk, Tasar, Conch shell carvings, Bell metal, Patachitra etc. Along with this the Malla kings constructed many terracotta and brick made temples as religious symbols from locally available building materials. Malla reign faced many ups and downs for several times. Naturally many cultural practices imprinted their material and non material culture to the indigenous Bishnupur culture. The terracotta temples witnessed as piece of evidence of that acculturation process. The temples of Bishnupur and surrounding areas were constructed in 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. The temple architecture of neighbouring state Orissa has great impact on the temple of the study area. Incarnation of Mughal and South Indian style of temple can also be found (Santra, 1998). The Mughal, Parsic, Indo-Parsic, Hindu classics, Buddhist style and the mythological influences are prominent in terracotta ornamentation. Beside that the influence of Portuguese architecture is prominent (Dasgupta 1980). Thus mixture of tangible or natural resource and intangible resource in form of religious beliefs makes temples as a part of cultural environment which becomes a resource base for tourism.*

**Introduction**

The temples of Bishnupur and surrounding areas were constructed between 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. During this period a profound political, social, cultural and religious revolution happened regionally all over

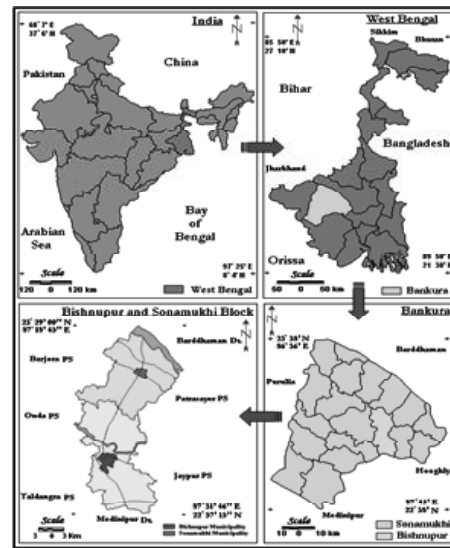
Bengal. This Cultural Revolution gives rise to a distinct culture not only to Bishnupur (popularly known as *Mallabhum*) but other areas of Bengal also. Bishnupur was the capital of *Malla* king (local chieftain).

Mallabhum being politically stable could concentrate on developing a social system based on Hindu philosophy in general and Vaisnava philosophy in specific. The temples of Bishnupur are the product of this religious belief system. The Malla kings constructed them as a religious symbol. The temples of Bishnupur are the result of combination of tangible natural resources (locally available laterite) and intangible resources i.e. religion, belief system etc. There is a great impact of Orissa, Mughal and South Indian style of architecture on the temples of Bishnupur (Santra, 1998). It is because there was a relationship between and among these places since ancient time. Bishnupur was shown as an ancient place on a map in the books of Cunningham (Cunningham, 1871). Ancient Commercial route to Kalinga run through Kanksa ó Sonamukhi ó Abantika ó Bishnupur ó Dandabhukti (Ghosh, 1976). So it may be said that diffusion of culture from north to south India happened through this route. The modern Review (March 1933, Page 348) said that Bishnupur lies on the highway to Puri (A District under Orissa state) from north India. So the place specificity of Bishnupur (map no. 1) supports it to get involved in the process of cultural mixing. The reign of Malla Kings ends with the establishment of Bishnupur as Municipal town in 1873. The relics of Bishnupur and its surroundings are no more treated as religious significance but now they become heritage site and focal point of attraction for tourists.

### Objective, Methodology and Data Source

Bishnupur is located in the Hindu dominated area and temples are religious symbol of Hindus. In case of Malda, Murshidabad, Bardhaman the Islamic culture was expressed by different kinds of Mosques, Dargas etc. But the study area has a

Location map of the study area



background of Hinduism. All over the Bengal terracotta temples are found but the most famous are the temples of Bankura especially the temples of Bishnupur. Who are the artisans of making these temples? History is silent about these questions. There is no authentic data about these questions. In this research work I delimited the analysis only on the structure and ornamentation of the temples of the study area. How the structure and the ornamentation of the temples has changed with the changing culture. Impact of changing culture is clearly been seen on the temple walls. The discussion is delimited on the role of human behavior and meaning in understanding people's relationship with environments, places and the impact of culture on landscapes. Once, these temples were made as a religious symbol. But now these are no longer of religious interest but they become center of tourist attraction. So my objective is to find out the how the changing culture plays significant role for creation of new resource. The methodology followed here is based on both empirical and secondary data. Variation in terracotta ornamentation on temples, architectural design has been collected directly from empirical observation. At the same time

different secondary data sources like books, journals, manuscripts and archival sources have also been used in this research work.

## Discussion

Temple a religious symbol must survive or time resistant. Locally available laterite is used as raw material in temples. Compare to marble or to sand stone or polished

granite it is less attractive. The people's perception about it was not appreciable. It does not have attractive look. So it is covered with *finial*.

### Temple structure and terracotta ornamentation in the study area

Temples of Bishnupur followed the Mughal architecture in *Khilan* (Pillar), *Volt*, *Trikhilan*

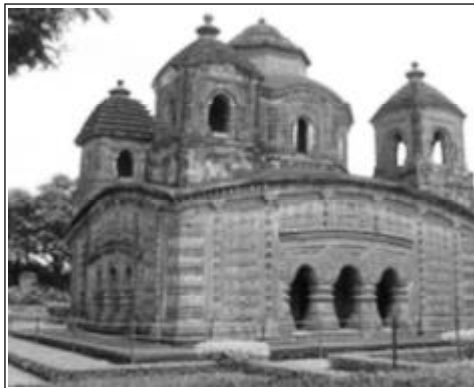
Name of templ	Location	Material used	Style
Malleswar (1622)	Bishnupur, Bhattacharya Para	laterite rock	Deul
Krishna & Balaram (end of 18 <sup>th</sup> century) (British influence)	North west of stone darwaja	brick	Rekha Deul
Keshabray & Kunja Bihari (2 <sup>nd</sup> half of 18 <sup>th</sup> century) (British influence)	Inside the fort area	teracota covered with	Rekha Deul
Kalachand (1656)	Near Lalbandh	laterite rock	Ek Ratna (single pinnacle)
Madan Gopal (1665)	Near Lalbandh	laterite rock	Pancharanta (five pinnacles)
Radha Govinda	Near Lalbandh	laterite rock	EkRatna (single pinnacle)
Radha Madhab	West of Kalachand	laterite rock	Two storyed building
Lalji & Radha-Shyam (1658 / 1758)	Near fort	laterite rock	EkRatna (single pinnacle)
Madan Mohan (1694)	Within municipal area	laterite brick	one pinnacles
Shyamrai temple (1643)	Near Gardarwaja	laterite brick	Five pinnacles
Rashmancha (1600)	Within Bishnupur town	laterite rock	Pyramid
Jorbangla (1655)	Inside the fort area	laterite Rock with terracotta brick	Do-chala
Siddheswar & Sonat Pal	On the bank of river Darakeswar	brick	Deul
Sridhar Temple (1845)	Sonamukhi market area	brick	25 Pinnacle
Temple of Elati (17 <sup>th</sup> century)	On the bank of the river Darakeswar	brick	Deul
Sanreswar Saileswar (1335)	Dihar	brick	Deul

doors (Piers and pillar) terracotta ornamentation, *Kiosk* (A light open pavilion) and for *Ratna* (Pinnacle) style these followed the lineated and the *Pira* temple structure of Orissa style (Mc.Cutchion, 1964& Santra, 1998). The Malla Kings of Bishnupur had great interest in the promotion of *Ratna* or Pinnacle temples. The lineated or *Rekha* temples, which are marked as a memento of 10<sup>th</sup> ó 11<sup>th</sup> Century and were abolished, renovated in 17<sup>th</sup> century. In these

temples we can mark even the *Jagmohan* which was introduced later (Sri Sri Shyam Chand Mandir of Hazrapara in Bishnupur) (Bandopadhyay, 1975).

Locally available laterite is widely used for construction of temples. In some cases stone is also used as building materials. Beside that baked earth (terracotta) is also used for the ornamentation of temples (Bandopadhyay, 1971) Based on the structure, materials used the temples of the study area classified as ó

**Images are showing the architecture of terracotta temples of Bishnupur and surroundings.**



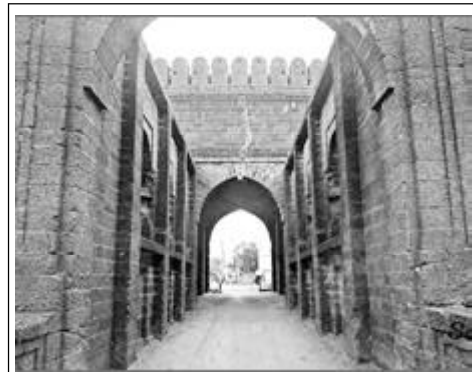
Shaymrai Temple (*Pancharatna*)



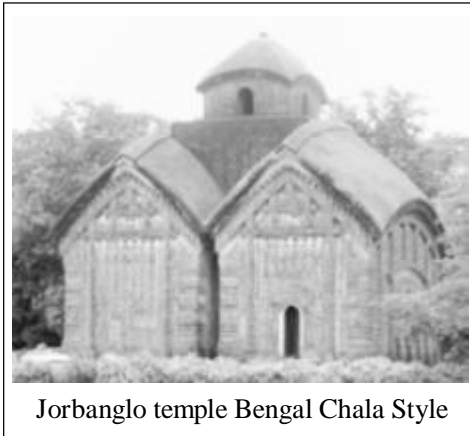
Kalachand Group of *Ektratna* temples



Rasamancha Temple Pyramid Style



Pathar Darwaja Mughal Fort Style



### **Temple ornamentation and cultural assimilation**

The Mughal, Parsic, Indo-Parsee, Jain, Buddha, Hindu classics and the mythological influences are prominent in terracotta ornamentation. Beside that the influence of Portuguese architecture is prominent (Dasgupta, 1980).

### **The Mughal influence:**

Depiction of Mughal turban, shoes, clothings (jama ó pajama) and Jahangiri crown are prominent. Hawk hunters, king with bird in hand, Political events like Portuguese war is found on Jorbangla temple which was held in the reign of Sahajahana. Besides tobacco smoking is seen on Shyamrai temple (1643). If we minutely analyse the history of Mughal era we find that in between 1600 ó 1650, the farmers of India started cultivation tobacco among which the Ambari tobacco of Bishnupur was very famous.

The temple structure of Bishnupur itself is influenced by Mushlim culture. The brick temples of post Mughal era at Bishnupur also followed Mughal architecture e.g. Squint type of design on octangular/ circular wall set domical were constructed by bricks step by step. In some cases vault is

noticeable e.g Khar Bangla Temple. Fire weapons, miniature painting, and military forces, protect the Malla capital from enemies by construction of Garh surrounding the Kila and stone made special door reveals the impact of Mughal culture on Bishnupur. Besides this construction of Dalmadal Canon following the famous canon Kale Khan and Jahan Kasan of Murshidabad also shows a Mughal impact (Dasgupta, 1980).

### **Parsee Influence**

The dragon sketches in terracotta temple are the result of Indo-parsic influence because Mughal previously influences the Parsic. The kings are found wearing dragon printed dresses. This motivates the artisans of Bishnupur to create such designs on terracotta. Besides, the foreigners with varieties of dresses and turban are found, e.g. Sridhar temple (25 pinnacles) of Sonamukhi. Pillow, hand fan, Otto-pot, veil, women-trousers is common on Jorbangla temple which depicts Persian culture.

### **Influence of Hindu Epic (Ramayana and Mahabharata)**

On the western wall of Jorbanglo temple stories of Rama, Laxmana, Bharata, and Satrugana are seen. Bhisma lying on arrows are another sculpture on the temple wall.

## Vaisnav Influence

Great Malla King Bir Hambir converted to rationalism in end of 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Bishnupur followed the miniature painting of Patañjali centering the Vaisnavism. Story of *Srimad Bhagbat Gita* and *Gitagovinda* can be found on terracotta sculpture. Picture of Lord Krishna sucking milk from cow is found on the southern side of upper floor of octagonal pinnacle which is at the center of Shyamrai temple. Lord Krishna playing flute is seen on the southern veranda of Jorbanglo temple. Radha Krishna is seen on the south east corner of Jorbanglo temple. Kaliya Daman (Lord Krishna killing a snake named Kaliya), Jalakeli (Lord Krishna playing with friends of Radha in a pool), Vastra Haran (Lord Krishna saving Draupadi when her saree was being taken away by Dussawasan), Nouka lila (Lord Krishna in a boat with friends of Radha) also depicts the influence of Vaisnav culture.

The picture of conquering of Srinivasa Vaisnavite on *Malla Sava* is clearly drawn on the Southern wall of Madan mohan temple. On the front side of the temple picture of Srinivas at learning a *pathi* is depicted on the base of the temple.

Influence of ten incarnation of Lord Vishnu I chitra is also depicted on temple wall. It is also says about the vaisnav culture. Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Varmana, Ram, Balaram, Parasuram, Buddha, Kalki are the ten avatars or incarnation of God. But in Bishnupur Jagannatha is seen in place of Buddha. It is an influence of Orissa. The temple which were established before 18<sup>th</sup> century those were shown statue of Buddha inspite of Jagannatha. This is a vaisnav influence comes from Orissa (e.g. Sridhar mandir where Jagannath is the 9<sup>th</sup> incarnation inspite of Buddha established on 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century).

## Jain Influence

Jainism comes in the study area following the commercial routes from North India to Kalinga and from Kalinga to *Rarh* (J.D. Beglar, 1978 Report of a tour through Bengal provinces) on temples of study area. The influences of Jainism are more than any other religion. The word *Rarh* may have come from the Sanskrit word *Roorha*, meaning rough or uneven. In the ancient Jain Sutra *Rarh* refers to that part of Bengal, limited by the Bhagirathi River. *Rarh* stated an isolated forest covered area. 6<sup>th</sup> B.C. Jain *sramana* (monk) were come to *Rarh* for perching their religion. *Rarh* was situated on the caravan route from Banga to Magadh (Singha, 1951). In Buddhist books *Rarh* was known as *Sumbha*. A statue of Tirthamkar Risava (Jain monk) is found on the Sanreswar temple of Dihar which is now worshipped as Siva. In Dharapat village statue of naked Shyamchand which worshipped with Narayan statue, is actually a Jain statue (5ft / 3ft). Beside this temple the expanded hood of a serpent originally a Jain sculpture, now converted to Manasa statue (goddess of Snake). This temple was formed in 1323 sakabda. Residual beside this temple is thought to be a prayer hall of Jains.

## The Portuguese influence

With the spreading of Portuguese rule, the Portuguese culture also influenced Indian Culture. The artisans of Bishnupur temple included Portuguese culture. The Dagon with a guitar and Portuguese war ship are the evidence of that.

## Importance of Place

In some cases place also take an important role for the ornamentation of temple walls. Impacts of Gujarat, Rajasthan are seen in picture of milk sucking by Krishna. Impact of Rajasthan is also seen through description

of horoscope. Imprint of Orissa is seen in Shyamrai temple. The *rekh* and *pira* type of temples are formed following the Orissa type which was transformed into *Ratna* temple in Bishnupur. Percy Brown stated :-Some comparison with brick in Bengal spring to the mind. A number of those have been discovered some well published but hardly any go back to a period earlier than 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.ø Percy Brown has already drawn attention to an 18<sup>th</sup> Century brick temple with curvilinear roof at Bishnupur (Indian architecture, vol. ó I page 188) but which differs rather conspicuously from our Rasika Roy in the surface decoration full of Bankuraø skilled work.

### **Description of ornamentation according to temples**

#### **Shyamrai temple or Pancha Ratna Temple**

Raslila, Krishna at dancing poses ó Both side of the eastern entrance.

Gaja Kachap Chitra ó Western Barandah

Friendship ó southern Varanda ó Krishna at giving fruit to his friend.

Collection of Parijat ( Exotic flower) ó

Ceremonial washing of Ram ó

Gujrat style hand fan in the hand of a dancing garl, Orissa type dress

Rash Mondal motif following the Konarak of Orissa in the interior of the temple.

Jain Tirthankar on the way towards interior of the temple.

Picture of Lord Jagannath on the southern barandha

Vishnu at (eternal lying equilibrium state) ó Ananta Sayan

Makar rath ó a mythological aquatic animal

Dragan motif ó on the southern varanda beside false door.

Five faced Shiva and valiant man (myth)

Uma-maheswar, Kartikeya, Radha Krishna, Sita Ram on the central top floor.

To smoke a hookah

Dancing Krishna, Playing flute, picture of Krishna Balaram

Different ethnic groups wearing various kinds of dresses on the central top Pinnacle.

Ram ó Ravana at war at the eastern entrance.

Mallah warriors, Dagan, Ganesh, Dasavatar, Buddha, wearing peculiar dress, wrestling

#### **Jorbangla**

Krishna and Balaram at boyish sport, killing of Baka rakshas, Taraka on the front side.

Ram, Laxman, Bharat & Satrugna in the motherø womb in the front side.

Picture of Krishna, Radhika, Barai, Sri Krishna Kirtana, nouka lila (activities of Krishna on Boat)

Musical instruments. A Gandharba (Dame god) with a tambura, on the front varanda

Prists at worship of god ó front 93 egetati

Visma lying on arrows ó on the south west challa (thatch)

Killing of tiger. The sight of the hunters resembles with Mahenjodaro civilization on the front chala (thatch)

A man with a book, may be picture of Srinivasa ó famous Vaisnavites of the North east corner of the back chala (thatch)

Killinf of Kangsa, picture of different animals and birds, egetati with fly wing (mythological animal) on the eastern wall of first chala ( thatch)

**Khar Bangla Temple**

Two women are reading books ó North Eastern corner.

**Madan Mohan Temple**

Paintings like swan, conquering of Malla residence by Srinivasa ó on South East corner.

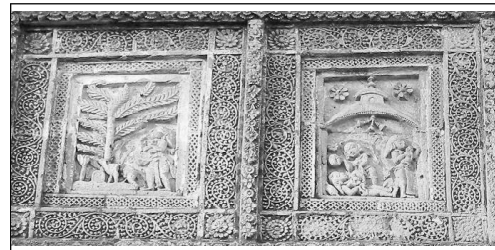
**Temple ornamentation at a glance**

Ramayana	Sculpture of Rama, Laxmana, Bharata and Satrughna, Rama & Ravana at war.
Mahabharata	Bhisma is lying on arrows.
Lord Krishna & Vaisnavism	Lord Krishna at sucking milk from cow, Krishna at playing flute, Story of Radha Krishna, Kaliya daman, Jalakeli, Vastraha rana, Noukalila, Ten avatars of Vishnu at equi librium position, colle ction of parijat by Kris hna.
Social event	Smoke a Hookaa, friend ship, man in reading book, killing of tiger
Historical events	Mallah warrior, Buddha, Srinivasa, Conquest of Mallah residency by Srinivasa.

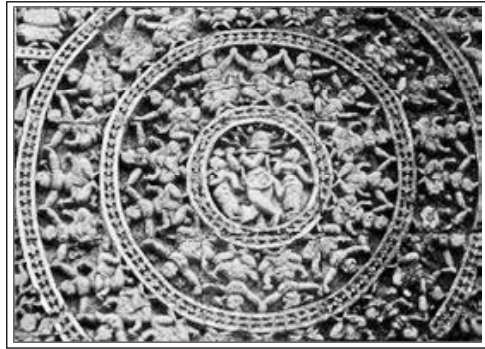
Flora	Creeper, lotus.
Fauna	Pig, horse, elephant, camel, deer, snake, ox, swan, birds, Tiger, fish, goose etc.
Mode of transport	Makarrath, chariot, country boat, elephant, horse.
Weapon	Hand missile, sword, bow & arrow.
Dress	Ethnic dress, wrestling, classical dancing dress
Abstrcut design	Octagonal shape, paisley, circle, trellis
Ornaments	Bangle, necklace, crown
Mythological character	Uma Maheshwar, Kartikeya, Ganेशha, Lord Jagannatha, Kali etc

In short the temples include the picture of figures of Royals, monks, common people, fictitious creatures, animals, fish, tree, historical events, royal events, common mode of transport, social life etc.

**Terracotta ornamentation on temples depicts cultural diversity of ornamen tation**









## Conclusion

Temple is a component of historical environment. These temples were made for religious purpose. According to the religion of the king the ornamentation structure of temple become changed with changing concept of religion. Now most of the temples lost its religious significance. These temples are part of cultural environment but ultimately they become a cultural resource for tourism. Column of laterite has a visual attraction or appeal .But due to lack of proper awareness often makes treat our rich heritage casually (The Sunday Statesman, Impression,1998). For this reason it is often seen that the temple wall is often used for inscribe the name of the tourists. Many terracotta tablets were stolen or damaged .The temples were not properly maintained.

Recently World Heritage Centre decided to announce Bishnupur as world heritage site. Indian National Trust for Art & Cultural Heritage (INTACH) formulated and design documentation and preservation work on Bishnupur Temples (The Statesman, 2005). Ultimately it is a resource of the cultural and economic environment. At present these temples become the symbol of tourism attraction and are highlighted through several articles, books and news papers(The Statesman,2002) .Laterite is a tangible resource forms under certain

temperature, rainfall; vegetation characteristics, used as raw material for temple building. Temple is a religious symbol, part of cultural expression on natural landscape. Temple is an intangible resource as it is a symbol of religion. Mixture of tangible and intangible resource is found on the temple of the study area. Emphasis is given more on the ornamentation of the temple rather than the structure of the temple because culture has its imprint on the ornamentation of temples. The temple which was constructed pre Muslim era is mainly brick temples (11<sup>th</sup>& 12<sup>th</sup> century, Bahulara temple) and are of *Deul* type. Later on the structure changed. Muslim imprint on the structure of post Muslim temples are prominent. The *trikhilan*, column, inclined *chala* pattern are based on Muslim culture. The famous hut pattern of Bengal has also emphasized temple structure. The ornamentation i.e. geometric pattern, picture of Nawab, sultan also depicts about Muslim culture. The Muslim has no direct influence on Malla Kings till it has influenced the design in passive ways. After the conversion of Malla Kings to *Vaisnavism* the ornamentation includes the story of *Radha Krishna*, *Rasmondal*, activities of Krishna etc. After 18<sup>th</sup> century the terracotta works has lost its significance in temple ornamentation.

Thus a tangible material laterite rock creates resource base for temple building. Previously the temple has religious significance. But with changing culture it loses its religious significance and become a part of cultural and economic environment and attracts tourists.

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