

# Bengal Temple Architecture

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## Introduction

West Bengal has innumerable temples—some are pretty old while others are less so. They are scattered in different parts of the state—in villages, in towns and even in cities. Some have intricate terracotta decorations; some have floral motifs while others have stucco works on them and some even fresco work. Each temple is unique in this respect.

Daily worship is performed in most of the temples; in some the deity is taken from the temple and worshipped in a nearby house while there are some temples which are completely abandoned. The temples built in different eras are either made of bricks or of stone. There are also a few temples where the structure has partially collapsed and which are, therefore, abandoned.

The temples are of different shapes and sizes. The divisions of the temples 'are based on appearance, not structure.'<sup>1</sup> Following are the basic divisions:

A. *Bānglā*: (1) *ek bānglā (do chālā)*

(2) *jorbānglā*

B. *Chālā*: (1) *chārchālā*

(2) *ātchālā*

(3) *bārochālā*

C. *Ratna*: (1) *ekratna*

(2) *pancharatna*

(3) *navaratna*

(4) *trayadashratna*

(5) *saptadashratna*

(6) *ekabimsharatna*

(7) *panchabimshatiratna*—

(i) three storeyed

(ii) double storeyed

(8) *giri-govardhan* type

D. Flat-roofed structures:

(1) with superstructure (*chālā*)

(2) with superstructure<sup>2</sup> (*ratna*)

(3) with superstructure (with smaller flat roofed structure)

(4) with superstructure (double storeyed)

E. *Rekha*: (1) 'Orissan'<sup>3</sup>

(2) *Pirha deul*<sup>4</sup>

F. Octagonal type<sup>5</sup>

G. Temples outside regular classification:<sup>6</sup>

(1) Anomalous combinations

(2) Modified designs

H. *Manchas*: (1) *Rāsmancha*

(2) *Dolmancha*

(3) *Tulsimancha*

(4) *Snānmandir*

The temples were built in different periods of history and a particular type of

architecture was prevalent in each of them. Not only the temple enthusiasts but common people at large are thrilled to see the magnificent architecture and the decorations on the temple walls by skilled artisans. It also helps to ascertain the social picture of a given period of history. The majority of the decorations are still intact but some have got damaged due to age and lack of proper maintenance and some have lost their beauty due to improper colouring. But whatever remains is enough to indicate the rich cultural heritage of Bengal. There are a number of structures which are centrally protected monuments under Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), some are state-protected monuments under Department of Archeology, West Bengal, while the rest are under private control.

### The 'bānglā'-type

Now, coming to 'bānglā'-type one finds it sub-divided into *ek bānglā (do chālā)* and *gor bānglā*. In the villages of West Bengal, we come across the huts. This structure imitates the hut style.<sup>7</sup> It has two sloping roofs. Examples can be drawn from the famous 'Nandadulal Temple' in Chandannagar in Hooghly district, built by Dewan Indranarayan Chowdhury in 1739. There is one such temple also in Bagbazar, a Grade-I heritage structure under Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), that was founded by Jagatram Haldar. As far as this type of temple is concerned, there is either single or triple entrance but the one in Kolkata has a double entrance.

*Jor bānglā* type is said to be an altered and improved style of *do chālā*.<sup>8</sup> The roofs of two *ek bānglā* or *do chālā* temples side by side form a *gor bānglā* type. There are a few temples of this type like the famous

'Krishna Rai' or 'Jor Bangla Temple' at Bishnupur in Bankura. Built by Raghunath Singha in 1655, this south-facing temple is on a raised platform with a *chārchālā* tower. A protected monument under ASI, Kolkata Circle, this temple is one of the finest specimens of terracotta temples of Bengal. Another example of *gor bānglā* type is 'Chaitanyadeva Temple' at the temple complex of Guptipara. This temple is the oldest among the four temples of the complex. 'Siddheswari Temple' (built in 1740) at Kalna in Purba Bardhaman district is another example of this type.

*Chālā* type is common while *chārchālā* temple is rare. It is an imitation of a four roofed village hut. The temple at Palpara in Nadia, an ASI protected temple, is a case in point.

The most common among the temples of Bengal is the *ātchālā* type. *Ātchālā* as the name suggests consists of eight roofs. The 'roof edges may be rounded or straight...'<sup>9</sup> Some of the *ātchālā* temples are massive structures like 'Krishnarai Jiu Temple' (built in 1786 A.D) at Kanchanpally, Rathtala in Nadia district. Another massive *ātchālā* temple is 'Madan Gopal Temple' built in 1651 by Zamindar Mukunda Prasad Roychowdhury at Mellak in Howrah. 'Keshaveshwar Shiva Temple' at Mandirbazar in South 24 Parganas (built in 1748) is also of this type. In Kolkata we find a number of such large *ātchālā* temples like 'Rameswar Shiva Temple' at Nandaram Sen Street, which was built in 1739 and 'Radha Madanmohan Temple' at Tollygunge built by Uday Narayan Mondal in 1834. There are also other *ātchālā* temples of medium and small size in Kolkata.

*Bāro chālā* or twelve roofed temple is comparatively rare in Bengal. 'Damodar Temple' at Rautara in Amta in Howrah

district is an example of this type. The temple has terracotta decorations in its front.

### The 'ratna' temples

The 'ratna' temples are of different types and are found in different parts of West Bengal including Kolkata. Depending upon the number of pinnacles, the temples can be classified as *ekratna*, *pancharatna* and so on.

*Ekratna* temples are most commonly seen in Bishnupur where they were built by the Malla kings. These temples are mostly made of laterite. Examples are 'Kala Chand Temple' (1656), 'Lalji Temple' (1658), 'Radha Gobinda Temple' (1729), etc. *Ekratna* temple has a number of variants—'with *charchala* tower'<sup>10</sup> and 'with octagonal tower'<sup>11</sup>. Examples of the latter type are 'Ananta Basudev Temple' (1679) of Bansberia and 'Ramchandra Temple' of Guptipara, both in Hooghly district. Both the temples have exquisite terracotta works and are protected under ASI.

*Pancharatna* or five pinnacled temple is the most popular type in Bengal temple architecture. Examples of this type of temples are the famous 'Shyam Rai Temple' (1643) at Bishnupur, 'Gokul Chand Temple' (1639) at Gokulnagar, also in Bankura; 'Gopinath Temple' (1729) at Dasghara, Hooghly; 'Lakshmi Janardan Temple' at Surul in Birbhum; 'Sridhar Temple' (1833) at Kotulpur in Bankura, to name only a few. In Kolkata the twin *pancharatna* Shiva temples (1847) at *Choto Rasbari* complex at Tollygunge and Shiva Temple at Ratan Babu Road in Cossipore built in the early twentieth century belong to this category.

The most common among the *ratna* style of temples is the *navaratna* or nine pinnacled type. According to David J. McCutchion, 'the *nava-ratna* is basically a

*pancha-ratna* with an extra storey.'<sup>12</sup> The unique example of *navaratna* temple is the famous 'Dakshineswar Kali Temple' (1855) built by Rani Rashmoni. Other examples are 'Radhabinod Temple' at Kenduli; 'Gopal' and 'Lakshmi Janardan' temples at Ghurisha both in Birbhum; 'Radha Damodar Temple' at Hadal Narayanpur in Bankura; 'Raghunath Jiu Temple' (1792) at Baksa in Hooghly; 'Annapurna Temple' (1875) at Barrackpore and 'Radhakanta Temple' (1809) at Mondal Temple Lane in Kolkata.

*Trayadashratna* or thirteen pinnacled temple is 'formed by adding another storey to the *nava-ratna*.'<sup>13</sup> This type of temple is rare in Bengal. An example of this type is 'Sita Rama Temple' (1865), at Kharar in Paschim Medinipur.

*Saptadashratna* or seventeen pinnacled temple is extremely rare. An example of this type is 'Parbatinath Temple' at Chandrakona in Paschim Medinipur.

As far as *ekabimsharatna* or twenty-one pinnacled temple is concerned, there is no such design to be found in West Bengal.<sup>14</sup>

*Panchabimshatiratna* or twenty-five pinnacled temple can be classified into three storeyed and two storeyed structures. In the former type the *ratnas* are arranged in a group of three in each corner which amount to twelve in the first storey; two in each corner amounting to eight in the second storey and one each in the third making it four and lastly the central pinnacle. Four temples of this type are 'Lalji Temple' (1739); 'Krishnachandra Temple' (1751); 'Gopalji Temple' (1766) all in Kalna in Purba Bardhaman and 'Ananda Bhairavi Temple' (1813) in Sukharia, Hooghly. All the temples are quite large. In a temple with two storeyed structure which is smaller in size, the pinnacles are clubbed in a group of four

at each side amounting to sixteen in the first storey, followed by two in each corner in the next storey leading to eight and the central pinnacle. There is only one such temple—‘Sridhar Temple’ (1845) which can be found at Sonamukhi in Bankura. All the above temples have rich terracotta decorations. The first three are under ASI protection.

Another type of temple, less found in West Bengal is the *Giri Govardhan* type where the roof is designed in such a way that it looks like a mountain with figures of human beings and animals inscribed on it. An example of this type of temple is available near Sonamukhi and another at Rajagram both in Bankura and at Kalna, just opposite Lalji Temple.

#### Flat-roofed structure

Temples which look like flat-roofed structures rest on pillars. This type of temple is found in Kolkata. The temples may have terracotta decorations as in ‘Damodar Temple’ (1769) at Haldarpara in Kotulpur and ‘Rupeswar Temple’ (1765) at Kalna, ‘Siddheswari Kalibari’ (1843) at Baranagar. In Kolkata this type of temple architecture can be found in ‘Nistarini Kali Temple’ (1850); ‘Patit Pabani Durga Mandir’ (1781) at Khidirpur.

Flat-roofed structures may or may not have superstructures. In case of superstructure, it can be a *chārchālā*. Example of this type is ‘Anandamoyee Kali Temple’ (1804) in Krishnanagar in Nadia. In the case of Sitala Temple at Sonamukhi, the superstructure is of *pancharatna* type. In Govinda Temple, Gazipur in Howrah, there is a *dālān* in the first storey which is smaller in size than the one on the ground. A temple in the complex of Sudhakrishna Bhadra at Kotulpur has a double storeyed superstructure. Another temple of the same

type dedicated to Damodar is found at Rajagram in Bankura. The unique thing about this temple is that the ground floor is made of laterite while the first floor is made of brick.

#### Other types of temple

*Rekha deul* of ‘Orissan’ type is generally found in the western part of West Bengal, bordering on the neighbouring state of Orissa. An example of this type is the brick-built temple of ‘Ichai Ghosher Deul’ at Gourangapur in Paschim Bardhaman district. It is an ASI protected monument.

*Pirha* type is generally seen in temples of Midnapore and Bankura.<sup>15</sup> An example of this type is ‘Ekteswar Temple’ at Bankura.

There are a number of temples in West Bengal which are neither of *chālā*, *ratna* or *dālān* type—they are somewhat octagonal in shape. However, most of the *rasmanchas* are octagonal in shape. These temple-like structures are generally either close to the main temple or within the temple premises. In some cases, these octagonal temples may be of ridged *rekha* type. Examples are ‘Bisheshwar Temple’ (1836) at Sribati in Katwa in Purba Bardhaman; ‘Hathtola Mahaprabhu Temple’ at Ilambazar and ‘Shiva Temple’ at Supur both in Birbhum.

There are some temples which do not follow any definite architectural form as such but are either combination of one or more forms or of a completely new form. They are regarded as temples outside the common classification. They are broadly of two types—anomalous combinations and modified designs.

Anomalous combinations may have *chālā* and *ratna* or, to be precise, ‘*āt-chālā/pancha-ratna* combination’.<sup>16</sup> Examples of

this type include Jateswara Shiv Temple at Mahanad, Hooghly. It has a ‘widely ridged type with curved cornice’.<sup>17</sup> Another example is Haurihat Shiv Mandir at Mandirbazar in South 24 Parganas. Founded in 1633, this temple is a ‘tightly ridged type with curved cornice and pointed *shikhara*’.<sup>18</sup>

Modified designs refer to ‘modification of *ratna* designs’.<sup>19</sup> An excellent example is ‘Hanseswari Temple’ (1814) at Bansberia in Hooghly. The temple has thirteen *minārs* or *ratnas*, each of which looks like a lotus bud. Another example is Radha Damodar Temple in the Mondal mansion of *choto taraf* at Hadal Narayanpur in Bankura. Like other temples it has a triple arched entrance and the panels are rich in terracotta works.

### ‘*Manchas*’

‘*Manchas*’ are of three types—*rāsmancha*, *dolmancha* and *tulsimancha*. They are situated a little away from the main temple where mainly the deities of Radha Krishna are worshipped throughout the year. The *rāsmancha* was very common in the nineteenth century Bengal.<sup>20</sup> Of the three, *rāsmancha* is the largest. It is a temple-like structure where the idols of Radha Krishna are placed on the occasion of *Rāshyātrā* to enable the devotees to view the deities.

*Rāsmancha* is generally octagonal in shape. Its walls are decorated with terracotta works or floral motifs and some may even have fresco work in them. These *manchas* are scattered all over Bengal and even in Kolkata. The *rāsmancha* of Bishnupur built by 49th Malla King Bir Hambir around 1600 A.D is a unique example. In Kolkata there is a *rāsmancha* each at Bagbazar and Cossipore.

‘The *dolmancha* was most commonly built in the eighteenth century’.<sup>21</sup> Like

*rāsmanchas*, *dolmanchas* are of various shapes and sizes. Generally, a *dolmancha* is *chārchāla* or four-roofed structure but they may even be of *ratna* type or pinnacle-shaped. ‘A *dolmancha* either stands on four columns or four corner wall sections.’<sup>22</sup> These columns, at times, are decorated with intricate terracotta works. The *dolmancha* is placed on a raised platform. On the day of *Dolyātrā*, the idols of Radha Krishna are taken out from the main temple and placed inside the *dolmancha* at dawn. These types of *manchas* are found in different parts of Bengal.

*Tulsimancha* is ‘a moulded base without superstructure’.<sup>23</sup> These are generally present in the temple complex where Radha and Krishna are worshipped and, in the courtyard, and even in the housetop outside the *thakurghar* (shrine) in case of domestic households. After dusk the female members of the family blow the conch shell, light the oil lamp and offer incense stick near the *tulsimancha*. This is a common feature in many rural households even today.

As far as the structure of *tulsimancha* is concerned, it does not follow any definite pattern. It can be quadrangular, octagonal, circular or even oval. Some even have terracotta decorations in them. Some are made of bricks with the top open so that the *tulsi* tree can grow. There is a provision just above the base for putting the oil lamp.

### *Snānmandir*

Apart from the three *manchas*, there is another type of structure very rare in West Bengal—it is *snānmandir*. It is a square structure on a raised platform with a flight of stairs and is used as a bathing place during the auspicious occasion of Jagannathdev’s *Snānyātrā*. An example of *snānmandir* can be found at a corner of the temple complex of Guptipara. ■

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\* This is the centenary year of the establishment of the Swami Vivekananda temple and the Swami Brahmananda temple at Belur Math. In this context, *Bulletin* pays its homage to the temple-culture of Bengal.

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