



Terracotta Temple in Nadia: History and Architecture

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Abstract: *As one of the oldest and most notable districts of undivided Bengal, Nadia district was not only glorified for its excellent knowledge and spirituality of East India. The architectural style of the terracotta temple here was also unique. As a result, regional or independent architectural styles became predominant, detached from the central artistic tradition. So the temples were built one after the other in the style of Nadia's religious architecture, particularly under the patronage of the ruler or Zamindar, and in the style of terracotta architecture. The sculptures of the temples here are coherent and follow an attractive, elaborate painting motif. All these terracotta temples reflect the contemporary thoughts, motives, and culture of the remarkable artist Nadia. The emperors, especially Raghav Roy and Rudra Roy, played a significant role in Nadia's architectural style. But during the reign of Krishnachandra Roy, the greatest king of this dynasty, he introduced a distinct style of temple architecture instead of terracotta decoration. That is why the trend of building terracotta temples faded with his reign. This precious terracotta artefact from Nadia's temples has been neglected for centuries. I have tried to draw the attention of civil society and researchers to the history of these temples.*

Keywords: *Architecture, terracotta, worship, Heritage, Inscriptions, temple*

For decades, Nadia's realm has been a haven for communal harmony. The confluence of Vaishnava philosophy with the strong Hindu legacy, and later the confluence of Islam and Christianity, has formed or brought advanced culture to this district since antiquity. That is why many religious Upasana (prayer) houses were built on the personal initiative of the local landlords or Zamindars, just as the collective efforts of the people were noticed through the establishment of religious institutions like temples, mosques, and churches. That is why A. L. Raju argues, "History is essentially the record of the lives of men in societies in their geographical and philosophical environment."¹ The most important aspect of the artistic tradition of Nadia was the terracotta temple architectural style. Although reference to the advancement of art and crafts is present in writing, no significant enough evidence has been discovered save from one or two ruined temples. Like other districts of Bengal, the Nadia



district also had some monasteries, such as the ruined Subarna Bihar near Nabadwipa, built during the reign of Ashoka in the Maurya period.² Ballal Sen's mound, as well as the mounds of Saligram, Baragachhi, and Devgram, may have opened up new opportunities in the district's history. The terracotta type of building was initially used in Nadia's temple architecture. The architecture of a terracotta temple is unique in that it is made of material that is molded, sun-dried, and then burned. This terracotta style was used to construct the temple and the architectural style of the Nadia district. Clay, which is normally the ideal resource for building durable and high-quality burnt bricks, was the predominant and easily obtainable material for architecture in Nadia. Gathering stones from outside to construct any temple or place of religious devotion is both expensive and time-consuming. However, just a few of the district's ancient and historical monuments have survived the ravages of time. Extreme riverine terrain characterizes the climate, with frequent changes in river flow resulting in the creation of alluvial plains and flooding being a common occurrence.³ The demolition of Sen-king Ballal Sen's palace and the gem temple built by Dewan Gangagabind Singh at Chaitanya Dev's birthplace is thought to have been caused by a shift in the river course.

Shikhar or Ratnakriti (peak) and Chala (hut) or Bengali style shape are the two main architectural structures and building techniques of temples in the Nadia district of Bengal.⁴ Many changes took place in the style of temple construction, mainly during the Gupta period, as this period is remarkable in the history of architecture. During this time, most of the temples were built in the style of high-rise temples with peaks. Such examples include the Dashabatar temple at Deogah in the Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh and the Mahadev temple at Nachna Kuthara. The brick temple of Bhitargaon near Kanpur, etc. The Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang has also described the Bodh Gaya Mahabodhi Temple as belonging to this stage.⁵ As a result, Vaishnavism and Shaivism played an important role as state religions during the Gupta period, and these religions gradually gained popularity in South India and exercised considerable influence. After the end of the Pala rule in Bengal, the Sena rule began in the late seventh century, and Hinduism was re-established. The arrival of the Sena in Bengal took place from Kannar in South India, and as a result, Vaishnavism and Shaivism had a significant influence during this period. Consequently, there was a massive revolution in the construction style of temples. Apart from Gaur, the Sena emperor Ballal Sen built two more capitals at Navadwip and Subarnagram. Lakshman Sen also built a majestic palace in



Nabadwip, which is now in ruins. In other words, this rich land of Nadia has played a significant role in politics, economics, social and religious affairs since ancient times, but unfortunately, no noteworthy pre-Islamic architectural style has been discovered yet.

The terracotta temple construction style of Bengal can be basically divided into three categories, namely, Chandni Dalan, Chala, and Ratna. The Chala (hut) temple style This style usually comes from a thatched house. It is basically named according to the number of arched sheds. Such temples are named according to the number of sheds, like Do Chala (two sheds), Char Chala (four sheds), Aat Chala (eight sheds), Baro Chala (twelve sheds), etc. Due to the heavy rainfall, this sloping roofed architecture is where the rainwater can easily get down and, due to the minimal damage to the architecture, the culture of this shed temple architecture is still alive today.⁶ Ratna (peak) temples, such as Ektratna (having one park), Pancharatna (having five parks), Navaratna (having nine parks), Triodasharatna (having thirteen parks), etc. If there is a pinnacle at the centre of the roof of such a temple with four sloping sheds and a curved cornice, then it is called Ektratna, and if there are pinnacles too on all four corners, it is called Pancharatna. That is, the temple is named after the number of gems, or pinnacles, in it. The Chandni or dalan (building) style of the temple is characterised by the simple style of a flat roof, pillars, and arched walls.⁷ It is believed that this genre of construction was developed indigenously in Bengal. Although not many ancient temples have been discovered in the Nadia district, some temples and idols of gods and goddesses have been discovered in different parts of the district. Based on speculation, it can be said that the idols of gods and goddesses discovered in different places were once worshipped in ruined temples, and these idols are intact today because almost all of them are made of hard stone by artists. The ancient idols of Vishnu, Basudev, Harihar, Abhayama, Dashbhujadurga, Ganesha, Trimurti, Ugratara, Padmapani, Buddha, Buroshiva, Dandapani, Joydurga, and Sashti Thakurani have been found in this land.⁸ Besides, the idols of lord Shiba and Yuganath Shiba are considered to be deities of Buddhist temperament in Pardanga, Nabadwip.

Although the Nadia district did not develop significantly during Islamic rule, particularly in terms of art and architectural style, the arrival of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Nabadwip brought a new form of art and culture that had a far-reaching effect on the stagnant Bengali race. Every wave soaked in the style of liberal Vaishnavism founded by Chaitanyadeva was revived just as it was illuminated in literary culture as well as in the style



of architectural sculpture. That is why the temples became strangely rich in art and terracotta sculpture. Its influence was felt not only in Nadia but also in different parts of Bengal, and temples were built in the style of terracotta architecture.⁹ During the post-Chaitanya period, some administrators were directly involved in the construction of temples in the Nadia district. Gautama Buddha in the art of different countries in Asia and in the art of Europe, Jesus Christ inspired artists for hundreds of years. Similarly, Sri Chaitanyadev also became an icon in the field of devotional Bengali art. Evidence of which is scattered in the temples, shrines, architecture, sculptures, woodwork, and paintings of Bengal. Many temples in different parts of Bengal have terracotta plaques on their terracotta plaques. In the last period of the Middle Ages, terracotta artists in the decoration of the temple made their art attractive by depicting Krishna Leela, mythology, social images, various variations of nature and Chaitanya Leela. Sankirtan is the most important field in Chaitanya Leela. But even though Chaitanyadev was born in the Nadia district, his activities in terracotta style were not displayed in the temple. The role of Nadia's dynasty was the most important in this case. On the other hand, the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, and Medinipur played an important role in the temple construction industry centered on Chaitanya Dev engraved on terracotta plaques.¹⁰ In 1606, Bhavananda Majumdar received many honours and decrees from the Mughal emperor Jahangir. On the basis of these decrees, Nadia, Mahatpur, Marupdah, Lepa, Multanpur, Kashimpur, Bayesa, Masunda, and 24 Parganas were acquired, and he concentrated on the governance of the state and shifted the capital to Matiari from Bagoan.¹¹ The exuberant style of the temple and architectural sculpture has been observed in different parts of the Nadia district. At the initiative of the kings of this dynasty, namely Raghav Roy, Rudra Roy, and Krishna Chandra Roy, assessing the features of temple architecture in different parts of Bengal in different styles, the temple researcher David J. Mccutchion has divided the temples of Bengal into three categories. According to him, the religious architecture of Bengal has seen three periods: the early Hindu period (up to the end of the 12th century, or a little later in western areas), the Sultanate period (14th to early 16th century), and the Hindu revival period (16th to 19th century).¹²

The antiquities of Chakdaha in Nadia district are very exuberant. A large, four-shed temple near Palpara in Chakdaha is considered to be a marvel of ancient antiquities. The 1896 book list of ancient Indian monuments in Bengal recorded that the temple is of ordinary size and has ornamental cut brickwork. Its age may, as it appears and as has been reported by



people who heard the inscription read, be 500 years. There is no idol there now. People say there was a lingam in it. When Mr. J. D. M. Beglar, when archaeological surveyor of Bengal, took measurements of it and also a photograph, there were two inscriptions on stone, which were taken off by Ram Sankar Sen, Sub-divisional officer of Ranaghat, and although afterward returned, are not forthcoming.¹³ In a report of the Indian Archaeological Survey of 1920–21, Sir John Marshall was the first to give a comprehensive account of the temple. The temple is currently under the control of the Archaeological Department. According to many, this temple was built by Gandharva Roy, a descendant of Someshwar, the king of Palpara.¹⁴ The aesthetic terracotta sight of this dilapidated temple is considered one of the best ancient monuments in the Nadia district. Apart from this, the eight-sided Shiva temple at Baganchra was built in the style of terracotta art in 1665. It is one of the most ancient temples in terms of antiquity. The marvellous idols and natural scenery with creepers bear the touch of excellent artistry. Raghav Roy, a grandson of Bhavananda, built two Charchala temples at Dignagar in 1669. He also dug a huge lake here, and the place was named Dighikanagar after the name of the lake.¹⁵ The temples built by him had excellent terracotta sculptures and craftsmanship. These temples were decorated with fine terracotta carvings and various royal processions, including horse riders and armies. Apart from these, there were representations of the bands of the Hari Samkirtan party, guards, musicians, Krishna Leela, etc. The inscription of the temples has fortunately survived, which informs us about the date of establishment of the great temples and the excavation of the lake. But, at present, one temple at this place is intact, while another is almost destroyed. Even a Shiva idol from the temple has been stolen.¹⁶

The Charchala (four sheds) Shiva temple at Matiari, the ancient capital, founded by Bhavananda Majumdar, the ruler of Nadia, also known as the Rudreshwar Temple, stands as a reminder of the ancient tradition. It is said that Raja Raghav Roy named this temple after his beloved son, Raghav Roy. Built of bricks and terracotta ornaments, the temple tells many untold stories of history. The walls of the temple depict Muslim warriors of the Mughal period in terracotta-style craftsmanship. But the statues of Muslim warriors are usually not seen in any other Hindu temple, so the workmanship of this temple is a rare example of craftsmanship. Another four-shed Shiva temple built by Raghav Roy is found in the village of Srinagar in Chakdaha. But sadly, this temple is now completely extinct after a long period of neglect and lack of maintenance. Probably in 1640, Raghav Roy was attracted to this village while attending a meeting here and built a palace here to live in a pleasant environment and



renamed it Srinagar. The river Sarala used to flow by the side of the palace. But now, the river is completely stagnated, the palace has been completely destroyed, and a brick kiln has sprung up. As a result, the history of the place has become extinct, and people have forgotten the ancient legends associated with the place. In addition to the pair of twin terracotta temples in Srinagar, another Shiva temple was built to its east. Permanent residents of the place also consider this temple to be a very ancient temple. There is a board on the wall of the temple with the inscription, "Nilkantha Mandir." The founder is Usharani Devi. The Charchala Shiva temple at Shimulia village in Chakdaha is estimated to have been built 700–600 years ago. The temple is said to have been built by a local zamindar family. The current descendant of this family is Kalipada Bandyopadhyay. At present, the temple is almost destroyed. At one time, this temple was built in the form of a terracotta with bricks.¹⁷

That is why the artwork of the temple is still visible to some extent. The Jorbanglo temple in Birnagar was built with the finest terracotta ornaments. The ancient name of Birnagar is Ula. Ulaichandi was the ancient and influential goddess of this village. The village was named Ula after her. Looking at the ancient buildings of Ula, it is conceivable that the town of Ula is very ancient and many temples were once built here. Kashishwar Mishra, the founder of the Mustofi dynasty of Ula, or Birnagar, was the Naib Kanungo, or revenue officer, of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan of Bengal.¹⁸ He built the Jorbangla Temple of Radhakrishna in 1694. This architectural masterpiece, built by skilled craftsmen, carries the distinction of being one of the finest examples of artistic craftsmanship in the Nadia district. Various forms of nature have been portrayed on the walls of the temple in the terracotta. Besides, Krishna Lila, various forms of mythological deities, various hunting scenes, battle scenes, the images of Goddess Durga, and social images of the Ramayana and Mahabharata were constructed in terracotta style. Dogachhi village near Krishnanagar is famous for the Shiva temple of Dogachhi on the banks of the Anjana river. This temple was originally built in the style of Charchala. The temple was also built with terracotta ornaments and in the terracotta style. The temple was built in the style of the Raghebeswar temple in Diknagar, especially in its style of construction, which is why scholars consider Raghav Roy to be the builder of this temple. Built in 1669, the exquisite terracotta-ornaments temple with its exquisite ornaments and ornaments is now in ruins. The village of Belpukur, near Nabadwip, played an important role as an ancient town and once as a field of education and culture. This village is situated on the banks of the river Bhagirathi. Famous scholars used to practise



Sanskrit scriptures here under the patronage of the king of Nadia. As a result, like the Nabadwip, many toles and quadrupeds were formed here. It is said that once the great Pandit Ramchandra Bhattacharya attained Siddhi or Moksha (deliverance) by meditating under a bale tree near a local pond, leading to the place's being called Belpukur. 108 Shiva temples were built under the patronage of Nadia king Rudra Roy and the courtesy of Ramchandra. But now there is only one Shiva temple left, and all the others have been destroyed.¹⁹ This style of construction for this temple is very aesthetic. The temple was built in the traditional style of rural Bengal. The temple is made of chunsurki (limestone and brick dust), bricks, and craftsmanship with terracotta work. The ancient Shivling of this temple is worshipped daily.

The famous and ancient Charchala Jaleshwar temple at Shantipur was once built.²⁰ In the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, there is a black stone Shivlinga next to the bronze idol of Goddess Durga and the Trinayani idol. There is controversy as to who established this temple. It is said that Rudra Roy's wife built this temple in the eighteenth century. As a result, the Shiva established in this temple was named Rudrakanta. According to another, once a devotee of Shiva named Vijayakrishna Goswami poured a lot of Ganga water in Shiva's field in the hope of rain, hence the name of this Shiva or temple is Jaleshwar. This temple is known for its extraordinary craftsmanship. Originally, this temple was also built in the form of terracotta. The artist's work of art is visible all over the walls of the temple. Images from mythology, stories of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Krishnalila, etc., can be seen on the walls of this temple. The ancient Baradi Math of Baradi village in Kushtia is famous for its terracotta ornaments. The architectural style of the temple and the terracotta ornaments on the walls depict soldiers with pistols and guns. Other sculptural images include hunters, saints, kings, queens, newlyweds, children on mother's lap, cows, ducks, snakes, dragons, spiral vines with flower petals, social conditions, various stories of Ramadan-Mahabharata, etc., are reflected in the artist's artistic craft. Although the architect and construction time of the temple is not known, scholars estimate that the temple was probably built sometime in the mid-eighteenth century, especially during the reign of Sirajdaulla. At present, there is no idol of any deity in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, which is on the verge of destruction.

During the late Islamic period and the British rule, a large number of temples were built in the Nadia district, following the unique style of temple architecture. The local Zamindars, or landlords, played the most prominent role in building the temples. But, a



unique style emerged in the fields of religion and temple construction after King Krishnachandra Roy came to power. It was under his patronage that Jagadhatri puja was initiated in Bengal. With the seizure of power in 1728, Krishnachandra introduced a new style of craftsmanship, ignoring the conventional style of temple construction.²¹ That is why the temple style introduced by him is called Krishnachandriya Roy Temple Architecture. The trend that he started in this style of construction was no longer followed owing to a lack of funds. Muslim influence can be noticed in his construction style. Notable among the architectural sculptures made by him were the Yugalkishore temple at Aranghata, the Buroshiva temple at Navadwip in 1757, the Rajrajeshwar temple at Shivnibas in 1754, and the Harihar temple at Gangabas in 1776. The style of construction of all these temples built by Krishnachandra lacks terracotta ornaments. He generally ordered the architecture and Arabic ornamentation on the temple walls. Krishnachandra was basically a believer in the Shakta ideology. That is why innumerable Shiva temples were built in Nadia district in his hands. That is why Dewan Kartikeya Chandra Roy commented that the king was also very respectful of the strong Vaishnava religion, but he had hatred for the community of the devotees of Chaitanya.²² Although the Nagar, Besar and Dravidian styles were recognised in Indian temple architecture, none of them was followed in the Bengali or Nadia temple construction style. The temples of Bengal were built in Bengal's own artistic style. At one time, many skilled artisans were associated with the terracotta industry in Nadia. One after another, unique sculptures were created here thanks to their artistic craftsmanship and skill. The main subjects of Nadia's temple sculptures were Krishnalila, Vishnu's Dashabatar, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and mythological social paintings, as well as images of geometric and natural variations reflected in their artistic craftsmanship.²³ As a result, the temples of Nadia have been the silent writers of history and the embodiment of ancient culture throughout the ages. Some stone statues, metal statues, and copperplate artefacts that belong to the Pala and Sena periods were discovered in Nadia, but no temple artefact has been discovered. The influence of the Gaudiya Vaishnava religious movement initiated by Sri Chaitanya Dev has been noticed in the style of terracotta that was developed in the construction of temples in Bengal and Nadia during the later periods. As a result, trends have developed in the terracotta craft. After Chaitanya, a new and distinct style of temple construction was developed, overlooking the terracotta style developed during the Gupta and the Pala periods.



Architectural sculpture not only meets the needs of the people for accommodation, temples or shrines, or administrative activities, etc. but also carries the identity of its qualitative taste and sense of art. In addition, it has been seen in India since time immemorial that the adoption of one style of architecture by another has led to the emergence of a high level of art. That is why technological advances are created in the combined stream with diversity occurring. The architecture of the Nadia district, which is rich in historical value, not only fulfils the needs of human habitation, protected shelters, temples, etc. but also introduces and carries the diverse sense of the art of the place. The all-Indian style of temple architecture emerged in the Gupta period. Later, regional styles emerged from these styles, especially in the Nadia district. On the other hand, there were some qualitative changes in the style of construction under the influence of Islam. Therefore, it is important to maintain and preserve all the traditional and beautiful terracotta temples in the district. Because even a few years ago, the twin Shiva temples built by the ancient Raghav Roy in Dignagar were intact. But now one of the ancient temples has been completely destroyed. The rest of the temple has been casually maintained by the government, but it is not yet safe. That is why the fine terracotta slabs are being destroyed. Skilled craftsmen are needed to repair and maintain them. Besides, the people of the area where these architectural sculptures are located need to be made aware of the importance and history of this place. The history of the Nadia district is inseparably associated with the terracotta architecture of the district. If the government's initiative to develop the tourism industry is supported by improving the infrastructure a little bit, the terracotta crafts will last a long time.

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