

LOOKING BACK INTO PAST : MYTH OF BISHNUPUR(WEST BENGAL)**Paulami Kundu**

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Myth is a folklore genre consisting of narratives that play a fundamental role in a society. Myths are stories that are based on tradition. Some may have factual origins, while others are completely fictional. But myths are more than mere stories and they serve a more profound purpose in ancient and modern cultures. Myths are sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience. Myths are as relevant to us today as they were to the ancients. Myths answer timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation. Myths are traditional story, especially one which explains the early history or a cultural belief or practice of a group of people, or explains a natural event.

Unlike fairy tales, myths are not always optimistic. True to the nature of life, the essence of myths is such that they are as often warnings as promises; as often laments as celebrations. Many myths are instructive and act as a guide to social norms, taking on cultural taboos such as incest, fratricide, and greed.

Now I am coming to the point that why people want to explore myths. So, we can understand that to know about the past or history of something we generally look back to history. We as human being also want to explore the cultural point of view of the past times, about the kings, queens and about the general people of that time. We want to discover the behaviour of kings with the others, their attitude, what they discovered, how the king maintains his locality etc. Myths are sacred tales that explain the world and man's experience. Myths are as relevant to us today as they were to the ancients. Myths answer timeless questions and serve as a compass to each generation. Robert Graves defines two functions for the myths of mythology. These functions are (1) to answer awkward questions and (2) to justify and account for the existing social order of a given society, suggesting myths may have a contemporary genesis as well as an ancient genesis. Myths are stories created to teach people about something important and meaningful. They were often used to teach people about events that they could not always understand, such as illness and death, or earthquakes and floods. Myth fulfils in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man.

Bishnupur is a place in West Bengal which is famous for its myth. Bishnupur was the capital of the Hindu Mallabhum kingdom, which was founded in the 8th century CE and was once the most important Hindu dynasty in Bengal. It was constituted a municipality in 1863. The town is surrounded by old fortifications and has more than a dozen temples. Famous for its medieval terracotta temples and glorious past, Bishnupur in West Bengal is now being planned as the state's first heritage city Kolkata, Bishnupur town in West Bengal is now being planned as the state's first heritage city. "Bishnupur is a very small place and not a planned

town. We want to make it big by including its outskirts and developing it as West Bengal's first planned heritage city," Prabhakar Pal, additional director at West Bengal's Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, said.



The temple town of Bishnupur surprises us with its astounding number of medieval Bengali temples that exhibit all varieties of structural forms. When we first enter the city Bishnupur there we can see a gate, which is called Small Gateway. The Small Gateway is a very simple structure with an arch and built with Laterite blocks. This Small Gateway was made by Mallaraj Birsingha.



This is the Main Gateway in Bishnupur is also known as Pathar Darwaja. This was the northern entrance of old fort of Bishnupur. This Gateway probably was also made by Mallaraj Birsingha and made off Laterite blocks. For accomodating army there was a double storied gallery in the central passage.

Then we can find the Radhasyam Tample. During the reign of King Chaitanya Singha in 1758 CE the temple was built dedicated to Lord Krishna. The Radhashyam temple in Bishnupur is known for the terracotta style of architecture. This south-facing temple has a curved roof with a single tower that crowns the square structure of the building.



Radha Shyam Temple is situated within a walled premise with a unique gateway structure. The front and the back surface of the gateway has superb terracotta carvings, mostly in the floral pattern. Enshrining the images of Lord Krishna and Radha in the sanctum, the Radha Shyam Temple is esteemed as the living shrine in the region. Along with the Radha and Shyam (Lord Krishna), the sanctum also includes the images of Nityananda and Chaitanya. In the temple vicinity, there is another shrine dedicated to Lord Jagannath of Puri.



Rash mancha in Bishnupur, West Bengal is one such historical building. Established in 1600 AD by the King Hambhir, the Rash mancha was used to display all the local idols in public during the Ras Festival which stopped in 1932. The temple was created to celebrate 'Ras' festival, when every image, large or small, in the form of Deities was taken in here from each and every adjoining shrine or temple. Rasmancha is no more a temple today, it has now been converted into a protected monument by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which is making sincere maintenance efforts on this masterpiece. There are now lighting facilities and the delicate terracotta craftsmanship that is etched on each and every brick and wall of the Rasmancha is being carefully conserved.



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Shyam Rai Temple of Bishnupur, the oldest temple built in this style, is also one of the best examples of Pancha Ratna Style of architecture. Built in 1643, the Shyam Rai Temple is also one of the earliest temples of Bishnupur. Built by Malla ruler Raghunath Singha, the building is an exquisite example of medieval Bengali art & architecture. Built entirely with clay bricks and clad in burnt clay(terracotta) tiles, Shyam Rai Temple is a marvel both in terms of its design and construction.



The Lalji Temple, Bishnupur, was built by the Malla king Bir Singha, along with Shikhara and it was built on a platform that was raised and square in shape. This Lalji Temple is devoted to the Radha and Krishna. The temple has Bengali architecture along with decorations of ornamental stucco. There is a dancing hall present in front of the temple.



Jor Bangla Temple is also called Keshta Rai Temple, has a typical architecture that is found in the southern part of Bengal. The temple was built by Malla King Raghunath Singha in c.1655. The structure resembles two traditional 'do-chala' village huts put together side by side. One of them serves as a porch and the other, which is behind the former, serves as a shrine. The curved roof of this pair of huts is surmounted by a 'char-chala sikhara'. The walls are decorated mostly with terracotta panels describing scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata along with floral and geometrical patterns. In the prayer room is the idol of Shadbhuja (6 hands) of Shri Chaitanya who is not worshiped anymore. Due to its terracotta art, this temple is placed among the best in Bishnupur. Jor Bangla Mandir is one of the few temples of Bishnupur which is in good condition.



These temples are called Jugal Kishore Krishna-Balaram temple. This temple centuries old, located little interior in Bishnupur. Beautiful place.

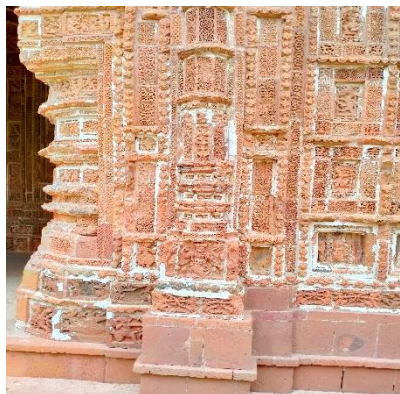
Architecture made on the stone by hand is very good. These two terracotta temples are dedicated to the Viashnav sect and have been built for Krishna and his brother Balram.



During 16th century, Bengal was a battleground where frequent wars and skirmishes were common between different factions of power, with rulers trying to establish supremacy on the land and its people. A sign of that conflict is the Dal Madal cannon that still stands in Bishnupur. It is probably the largest canon of wrought iron made during the reign of great Malla ruler, Veer Hambir. It was built to combat external invaders.

There is a myth about the canon. Legends say during the attack by Maratha warriors, Lord Madan Mohan, the royal deity of Bishnupur came out of the Madanmohan Temple and charged the canon to drive away the attackers and saved the town. ‘Dal Madal’ means ‘destruction of enemy.’ Dal Madal is also a shining example of how innovative indigenous artisans and ironsmiths of Bengal who use to make only household items like cauldrons, pans and pots could rise to the need of the time and built a huge cannon. They realized traditional weapons like swords and spears were inadequate to fight with the enemy. However, we hardly know names of those who made these cannons, other than a few whose names are inscribed on the war equipment they made. Like the Dal Madal cannon was made by Jagannath Karmakar.

For almost a thousand years it was the capital of the Malla kings of Mallabhum, of which Bankura was a part, till their power waned during the times when Mughal Empire weakened under the last monarchs of the dynasty. The patronage of Malla king Veer Hambir and his successors Raja Raghunath Singha Dev and Veer Singha made Bishnupur one of the principal centres of culture in Bengal. Most of the exquisite terracotta temples for which town is justly famous were built during this period.





The temple walls are covered with terracotta panels recounting the life and exploits of Krishna, scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and stories from the Vishnupurana (Fig.8). According to David McCutcheon, the Bengal temple terracotta art that developed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, a development on the previous sultanate architecture of the region, forms a self-contained art tradition that is distinct from both the preceding styles and the succeeding ones. McCutcheon says that even though terracotta decoration was in itself not a new practice, the finely chiseled carpet-like patterning of the terracotta facades of the Bishnupur temples was vastly different from the style of terracotta carving found in Buddhist monuments that used boldly carved and modelled laterite bricks. Terracotta itself ceased to be popular in the temple-building traditions of the later Pala and Sena periods: their broad brickwork acted as bases for stucco decoration alone.

The temples also draw inspiration from the sloping thatched huts of the region; the curved cornices of these temples, a characteristic feature of this design, are derived from the bent bamboo eaves of cottages in the Bengali countryside. This feature occurs in combination with a number of basic designs. There is the char-chala design that consists of a four-sided roof coming to a point on a square base. A similar but smaller roof may be constructed on top of the char-chala like a tower to make an at-chala. There is the do-chala or ek-bangla design, which features a two-sided humped roof evocative of the curved cornice on an elongated base. The Rasamancha in Bishnupur is the earliest known temple in existence built in the 'bangla' do-chala style. When two such do-chala huts are attached one in front of the other, where the front acts as a porch and the rear as a shrine, the design is called jorbangla, as can be observed in the similarly named Jor Bangla or Keshto Raya temple (1655). In the pancha ratna design, the roof is flatter than in the do-chala or char-chala, and has a tower in the centre which may be accompanied by four smaller turrets at the four corners. The number of storeys may be multiplied with the number of turrets in each corner from one (ek-ratna) to 25 (panchabingshati-ratna) (McCutcheon 1972). Apart from the unique architecture of the period, Bishnupur is also famous for its terracotta craft and its own Baluchari sarees made of tussar silk. Royal patronage also gave rise to Bishnupur Gharana (school) of Hindustani classical music in late 18th-century and the Bishnupur school of painting. The people of Bishnupur nowadays create unique idols, pots etc with burnt soil. These things are so much popular.

Romesh Chunder Dutt wrote in the late 19th century, "The ancient Rajas of Bishnupur trace back their history to a time when Hindus were still reigning in Delhi, and the name of the

Musalmans was not yet heard in India. Indeed, they could already count five centuries of rule over the western frontier tracts of Bengal before Bakhtiyar Khilji wrested the province from the Hindus. The Musalman conquest of Bengal, however, made no difference to the Bishnupur princes... these jungle kings were little known to the Musalman rulers of the fertile portions of Bengal, and were never interfered with. For long centuries, therefore, the kings of Bishnupur were supreme within their extensive territories. At a later period of Musalman rule, and when the Mughal power extended and consolidated itself on all sides, a Mughal army sometimes made its appearance near Bishnupur with claims of tribute, and tribute was probably sometimes paid. Nevertheless, the Subahdars of Murshidabad, never had that firm hold over the Rajas of Bishnupur which they had over the closer and more recent Rajaships of Burdwan and Birbhum. As the Burdwan Raj grew in power, the Bishnupur family fell into decay; Maharaja Kirti Chand of Burdwan attacked and added to his zamindari large slices of his neighbour's territories. The Marathas completed the ruin of the Bishnupur house, which is an impoverished zamindari in the present day."

Adi Malla was the founder of the Malla dynasty. Adi Malla ruled in Laugram for 33 years and has been known as the Bagdi Raja. He was succeeded by his son, Jay Malla, who invaded Padampur and captured the fort, then the power-centre. Jay Malla extended his domains and shifted his capital to Bishnupur. The subsequent kings steadily extended their kingdom. Among the more renowned were: Kalu Malla, the fourth in line, Kau Malla, the sixth in line, Jhau Malla, the seventh in line, and Sur Malla, the eighth in line, who defeated the Raja of Bagri, a place now in northern Midnapore. He was followed by 40 other kings, all of whom were known as Mallas or Mallabaninath, which means lords of Mallabhum or Mallabani. Family records show that they were independent of foreign powers. Bir Hambir, the 49th ruler of the Malla dynasty who flourished around 1586 AD and ruled in 16th-17th century, was a contemporary of the Mughal emperor Akbar. Bir Hambir was both powerful and pious. He was converted to Vaishnavism by Srinivasa. There is mention in two Vaishnava works, Prem-vilasa of Nityananda Das (alias Balaram Das) and Bhakti Ratnakara of Narahari Chakrabarti, about Srinivasa and other bhaktas (devotees) being robbed by Bir Hambir, when they were travelling from Vrindavan to Gaur with a number of Vaishanava manuscripts. However, Bir Hambir was so moved by Srinivasa's reading of Bhagavata that he converted to Vaishnavism and gave Srinivasa a rich endowment of land and money. He introduced the worship of Madan Mohan in Bishnupur. Raghunath Singh, who followed Bir Hambir, was the first Bishnupur Raja to use the Kshatriya title Singh. It is said that he was conferred upon with this title by the Nawab of Murshidabad. Bishnupur kingdom had entered its golden age. With exquisite palaces and temples built during the period that followed Bishnupur was reputed to be the most renowned city in the world, more beautiful than the house of Indra in heaven. However, it has also been recorded that while these royal patrons of Hindu art and religion were busy building temples they had lost much of their independence and sunk to the position of tributary princes. Raghunath Singh built the temples of Shyam Rai, Jor Bangla and Kalachand between 1643 and 1656.

Gopal Singh (1730–1745) was a pious king but was not fit to cope with the difficulties that faced his kingdom. He issued an edict that people of Mallabhum should count their beads and chant Harinam (name of God) every evening at sunset. Chaitanya Singh was another pious ruler unfit to face the difficulties. As he was too involved in religious matters he did not have time for administrative matters. He faced internal feuds. Damodar Singh, a cousin of his, tried to gain power. He was able to convince the court at Murshidabad about his capabilities. Initially, Siraj ud-Daulah lent him forces but he was unable to capture Bishnupur. Later, after the British defeated Siraj, Mir Jafar lent him stronger forces. He succeeded in taking Bishnupur, and Chaitanya Singh escaped to Kolkata with the idol of Madan Gopal, but the British restored the latter to power. However, intrigue and litigation continued for many years. Litigation ruined the Bishnupur Raj family and eventually in 1806, the estate was sold for arrears of land revenue and bought up by the Maharaja of Burdwan. Bishnupur was ceded to the British with the rest of Burdwan chakla in 1760. The Marathas had laid the country waste and famine of 1770 completed the misery of the kingdom. A large section of the population was swept away, cultivation failed and lawlessness spread. The once powerful king had been reduced to the status of a mere zamindar.

The city of Bishnupur is a city with beautiful tourist attractions that really refreshes the mind and heart. An environment of sanity and peace prevails amidst the green garden and ancient forts and deities. Bishnupur is a city rich in art that attracts tourists not only from West Bengal but from all over the world. The Temples of Bishnupur is one of the main sources of attraction in the mainland of the deltaic region of the Bhagirathi Hooghly catchment area. The specialty of the Temples of Bishnupur is the artwork for which these are famous for. The Temples of Bishnupur have originated in the Bishnupur town of the Bankura District in the Gangetic state of West Bengal of India. The state of west Bengal has always been a culturally rich state from the ancient times of Indian civilization. terracotta plaques fixed on temples comprises valuable elements for reconstructing the mythological, historical and socio-cultural heritage. Moreover, this temple-town is famous all over the world as the tourists from different countries have been astounded with the charm of these terracotta temples. It is only in Bishnupur in the whole of West Bengal that such a concentration of temples in numbers and varieties can be found.

WORK CITATIONS

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