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

Nilanjana Das Chatterjee

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 16th or 17th 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 16th and 17th 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 – Sonamukhi – Abantika – Bishnupur – Dandabhakti (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, Barddhaman the Islamic culture was expressed by different kinds of Mosques, Dargas etc. But the study area has a 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**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of temple</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Material used</th>
<th>Style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malleswar (1622)</td>
<td>Bishnupur, Bhattacharya Para</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Deul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishna &amp; Balaram (end of 18th century) (British influence)</td>
<td>North west of stone darwaja</td>
<td>brick</td>
<td>Rekha Deul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keshabray &amp; Kunja Bihari (2nd half of 18th century) (British influence)</td>
<td>Inside the fort area</td>
<td>teracota covered with</td>
<td>Rekha Deul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalachand (1656)</td>
<td>Near Lalbandh</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Ek Ratna (single pinnacle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madan Gopal (1665)</td>
<td>Near Lalbandh</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Pancharanta (five pinnacles)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radha Govinda</td>
<td>Near Lalbandh</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Ek Ratna (single pinnacle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radha Madhab</td>
<td>West of Kalachand</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Two storyed building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalji &amp; Radha-Shyam (1658 / 1758)</td>
<td>Near fort</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Ek Ratna (single pinnacle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madan Mohan (1694)</td>
<td>Within municipal area</td>
<td>laterite brick</td>
<td>one pinnacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shyamrai temple (1643)</td>
<td>Near Gardarwaja</td>
<td>laterite brick</td>
<td>Five pinnacles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashmancha (1600)</td>
<td>Within Bishnupur town</td>
<td>laterite rock</td>
<td>Pyramid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorbangla (1655)</td>
<td>Inside the fort area</td>
<td>laterite Rock with terracotta brick</td>
<td>Do-chala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siddheswar &amp; Sonat Pal</td>
<td>On the bank of river Darakeswar</td>
<td>brick</td>
<td>Deul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sridhar Temple (1845)</td>
<td>Sonamukhi market area</td>
<td>brick</td>
<td>25 Pinnacle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temple of Elati (17th century)</td>
<td>On the bank of the river Darakeswar</td>
<td>brick</td>
<td>Deul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanreswar Saileswar (1335)</td>
<td>Dihar</td>
<td>brick</td>
<td>Deul</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 10th – 11th Century and were abolished, renovated in 17th 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

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

Shaymrai Temple (Pancharatna)  
Kalachand Group of Ekratna temples  
Rasamancha Temple Pyramid Style  
Pathar Darwaja Mughal Fort Style
Temple ornamentation and cultural assimilation

The Mughal, Parsic, Indo-Parsic, 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 – 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 – 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 Satrughana are seen. Bhima lying on arrows are another sculpture on the temple wall.
Vaisnav Influence

Great Malla King Bir Hambir converted to rationalism in end of 16th century. The Bishnupur followed the miniature painting of Śrī Rādhācentering the Vaisnavism. Story of Srimad Bhagvat 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 Damān (Lord Krishna killing a snake named Kaliya), Jalakeli (Lord Krishna playing with friends of Radha in a pool), Vastra Haran (Lord Krishna saving Draupadī when her saree was being taken away by Dussawasan), Noukālīla (Lord Krishna in a boat with friends of Radha) also depicts the influence of Vaisnav culture.

The picture of conquering of Śrīnivasa Vaisnahite on Malla Savā is clearly drawn on the Sothern wall of Madan mohan temple. On the front side of the temple picture of Śrīnivas at learning a  Śrīputhiō is depicted on the base of the temple.

Influence of ten incarnation of Lord Vishnu Ī chittra is also depicted on temple wall. It is also says about the vaisnav culture. Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Varman, 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 18th century those were shown statue of Buddha inspite of Jagannath. This is a vaisnav influence comes from Orissa (e.g. Sridhar mandir where Jagannath is the 9th incarnation inspite of Buddha established on 18th to 19th 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. 6th 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 Śrīumbha ś. A statue of Tirthamkār Risavā(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. Resudual 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 17th and 18th century. Percy Brown has already drawn attention to an 18th Century brick temple with curvilinear roof at Bishnupur (Indian architecture, vol. I page 188) but which differs rather conspicuously from our Rasika Roy in the surface decoration full of Bankurā skilled work.

**Description of ornamentation according to temples**

**Shyamrai temple or Pancha Ratna Temple**

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

Gaja Kachap Chitra ñ Western Barandah

Frendship ñ southern Varanda ñ Krishna at giving fruit to his friend.

Collection of Parijat (Exotic flower) ñ

Ceremonial washing of Ram ñ

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) ñ Ananta Sayan

Makar rath ñ a mythological aquatic animal

Dragan motif ñ 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 Pinnancle.

Ram ñ Ravana at war at the eastern entrance.

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

**Jorbangla**

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

Ram, Laxman, Bharat & Satruhna in the motherô 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 godî front 93 egetati

Visma lying on arrows ñ 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 – famous Vaisnavites of the North east corner of the back chala (thatch)

Killing 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 – North Eastern corner.

Madan Mohan Temple

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

Temple ornamentation at a glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flora</th>
<th>Creeper, lotus.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fauna</td>
<td>Pig, horse, elephant, camel, deer, snake, ox, swan, birds, Tiger, fish, goose etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of transport</td>
<td>Makarrath, chariot, country boat, elephant, horse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon</td>
<td>Hand missile, sword, bow &amp; arrow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress</td>
<td>Ethnic dress, wrestling, classical dancing dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract design</td>
<td>Octagonal shape, paisley, circle, trellis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ornaments</td>
<td>Bangle, necklace, crown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mythological character</td>
<td>Uma Maheshwar, Kartikeya, Ganesha, Lord Jagannatha, Kali etc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 ornamentation

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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 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.

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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