CHAPTER-V

Religious Art and Architecture of Barak Valley upto 18th Century
A Hindu temple is a symbol or rather a synthesis of various symbols. As a religious institution and place of worship, the temple in India has had a hoary past. As a structure that enshrines a god or some other object of veneration, circumambulation, adoration and worship, it has had a varied growth in different parts of the subcontinent. Though fundamentally the basic elements of the temples and the worship in them derived mostly from Vedic and Puranic sources, in course of centuries they assumed different styles and patterns during their diffusion over wide areas from the cradle centres of the great Indian religions in north India. It is conceived in terms of the human organism which is the most evolved living form. To the Hindu, the temple is the abode of God who is the spirit immanent in the Universe. The temple, therefore, is known by such terms as ēdevālaya, Shivalaya and ēdevayatana. The architectural origins of the several parts of the temple are significant. The base is derived from the vedic sacrificial altar, the plain cubical cell of the sanctum from the prehistoric dolmen and the spire from the simple tabernacle made of bent bamboos tied together to a point. The sanctum with its massive walls and the dark interior represents a cave, while the superstructure with its peak like spire-the shikara-represents a mountain and is frequently designated as the mythical Meru, Mandara or Kailasa. The temple is a structure based on the rhythm of proportionate correlated measurements. It is a tirtha in a concrete, tangible form created by the human mind. Building a ānādu temple is comparable to the performance of a sacrifice. It is an offering or an act of pious dedication which brings merit to the builder and his family and vicariously to the devotee who visits the temple and to his relations. The devotee is not a mere spectator, he perceives and worships and thus fulfils the two objectives he has in visiting a temple. The ornamentations and imagery on the walls and the total form of the temple are designed to aid the attainment of these objectives.¹

Indian temple architecture falls broadly into two categories, the Nagara and the Dravida. The former is associated with the northern parts of India, the latter to the South, though neither is confined entirely to its respective region. Drawing from a common artistic heritage, more pan-Indian in nature, the two strands began to take form during the middle centuries of the first millennium CE. Rather later than the first Nagara or proto-Nagara, Dravida temple architecture was fully established during the 7th Century most importantly in two regions of Southern India- Tamil Nadu in the far South and Karnataka in the lower Deccan.
Nagara and Dravida are not the only kinds of temple mentioned in the Indian texts on architecture, the Satras and Agamas. In particular, a ternary classification is often given: Nagara, Dravida and Vesara. One source of great confusion to scholars in this century searching for the meaning of these terms has been regional variations in their use. It is now clear that South Indian treatises are not discussing three entirely differently species of temple but Southern temples with differently shaped ground plans or in some texts, with differently shaped crowning members. It is in North Indian usage that Nagara clearly means Northern and Dravida, Southern. It is now the generally accepted view that in North Indian texts ‘Vesara’ refers to the kind of temple favoured in the medieval Deccan. Justification for this view has been that the word ‘Vesara’ means ‘mule’ implying a hybrid and is applicable to later Chalukya and Hoysala temples because these seem to have certain Northern characteristics although made up of Southern forms and motifs.²

Bengal (Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal) saw a remarkable surge in architectural activities from the 16th to the mid-19th century. Hundreds of brick temples were built in this period in a new architectural style. Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a religious movement started by Sri Chaitanya (Mahaprabhu) in the first half of 15th century was the main motivation behind this burst of creativity and patronage. Many landlords and merchants converted to Vaishnavism and sponsored temple complexes for devotional worship.³

Temple architecture occupies one of the fascinating sectors of the architectural heritage of Bangladesh. In West Bengal and Bangladesh, temple architecture has assumed a unique identity. The temple makers had to resort to other materials instead of stone due to lack of suitable stone in the alluvial Gangetic delta. This gave rise to the use of burnt brick and terracotta as a medium for temple construction and decoration. Terracotta exteriors with rich carvings are a unique feature of Bengali temples.⁴

From 9th-11th centuries temple and temple sculptures were built under the patronage of the Pala and Sena rulers. During the Islamic rule in the following five centuries they were employed by Muslim rulers to build brick mosques and tombs, mostly in the city of Gaur. There they created for temples a unique Bengali architectural style that used imported Islamic forms like the dome and arch together with local forms such as the curved cornice, octagonal minarets, and brick ornamentation.
patronage reappeared in the 17th century, a period of architectural experimentation followed, a process that can be seen in the exceptional group of temples at Bishnupur. The end product was a Hindu temple based on Islamic domes, vaults, and arches alongside Hindu elements like octagonal columns, figural sculptures, and Orissan-style turrets. Temples can look very different from each other, but the differences are mainly in the roofs or superstructures. Otherwise, most temples have many identical elements. The most obvious of this is the arched entrance to the temple. This is usually triple-arched with heavy octagonal columns in between. Single arches are also common. Inside the temple, the chamber is usually covered by a dome (except in Bangla temples where it is a vault) and a vault always covers the porches. The other common feature is the curved cornice and parapet. The curvature is derived from the curved roofs (chalas) of Bengali village huts but is purely decorative in the temples. The most striking feature of a temple is the elaborate decoration that covers its walls. These are usually called the ‘terracotta’ temples. In some temples every inch of the temple’s surface (even the inside walls) is decorated with terracotta. Mainly this ornamentation is composed of rows of burnt-brick panels, each with a figure or geometric patterns, arranged in particular ways in specific parts of the temple walls, and often forming large sculptural compositions. After decades of experimentation, the organisation of these wall panels became standardised in the 18th century and temples were built with very similar decorative schemes. 

Classification of Temples

David McCutchion pioneered the classification of the temples of Bengal. According to David, there are three types of temples in Bengal. Those are

Hut style: It is the most common and simplest style of temple architecture. Hut style is divided into two types viz., Bangla temple- Ek Bangla (dohala/jor Bangla) and chala type- char chala, at chala and baro chala.

Indo-Islamic style: This type of temple has a combination of the Hindu and Muslim architectural features developed in the late medieval period. These are of two types viz., ratna type (temple structure on roof top) and domed type.

European influenced style: which developed in the 19th century. Beside this, flat-roofed temple form developed during the 19th century. The smaller flat roofed temples are called chadni and the bigger one is known as dalan. The pancha ratna and naba ratna types of superstructures are found only on the flat roofed temples.
The Bengali style or the hut shaped temple is not luxurious. Rather, most are modeled on simple thatched-roof earthen huts used as dwellings by commoners. This can be attributed to the popularity of bhakti cults which taught people to view gods as close to themselves. Thus, various styles like Ek-bangla, Jor bangla, do-chala, char- chala, and aat- chala, baro- chala and so on sprang up. Do-chala temple (twin hut) or Jor Bangla temple consists of two sloping roofs with curved edges or cornices meeting at a curved ridge and also built on a single platform. This style imitates domestic huts in Bengal and was first adopted in Bengali Islamic architecture. This temple style was rare except in the Jessore in Bangladesh.

The ratna temples consisting of the series of ornamental towers or ratnas. According to the number of ratnas these were named as Pancharatna (five-towered), Navaratna (nine-towered) or Satero ratna (seventeen-towered) in Bengal which is more luxurious than the Chala buildings.\(^7\)

Char-chala temple: In this type, four triangular roofs meet at a point, again with the ridges and cornices are curved. The temples are generally set on an elongated base with the roof of the chamber extended lengthwise from a central dome by arches and narrow corbelled vaults. The char-chala style is rare in Bengal. However some examples are still precariously surviving in the districts of Faridpur, Pabna, Jessore in Bengal and also in the district of Birbhum, Murshidabad, and Nadia in west Bengal.

At-chala temple style on the other hand became vastly popular with artisans and patrons in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in the districts of Hugli and Howrah. It is a mere a duplication of the char-chala temple with a further miniature roof structure repeated above to gain height. The larger aat-chala temples usually have a triple entrance.

Ratna style temples are the composite type of architecture. There are a few temples in Bangladesh where the two elements of the Bangla style and the Sikhara style are combined. The lower part of the temple has all the features of the curved cornices and a short pointed spire crowns the roof and this will be adorned with the introduction of ratnas or kiosks. These composite types of architecture with decorative towers or ratnas are common profile throughout Bangladesh.\(^8\)

Naba-ratna or nine towered temples, are found all over the country. The Kantanagar temple in Dinajpur, Hati-Kumrul temple in Pabna, The Dhamrely temple in
Khulna etc are the best examples of the खाबा-रत्ना temples. Kantanagar temple in this series is the most significant ornate architecture in Bangladesh. The temple had eight ratnas on each four corner of its two roofs and one ratna on the top roof of the temple. Every inch of the temple surface is beautifully embellished with exquisite terracotta panels from the bottom to the top. The plaques represent mythological (Ramayana and Mahabharata) scenes, flora, fauna, geometric motifs, the social life of medieval aristocratic people (probably the Mughal aristocrats) of Bengal and also few European boats and soldiers.

Pancha-ratna or five towered temples are found in Jessore, Puthia, Dinajpur, and Khulna district. The Gobinda temple at Puthia in Rajshahi was built in the first half of the 19th century. A Pancha Ratna Mandir is built on a square structure rising in two storeys and is crowned by a set of ornamental miniature towers, four on each corner of the first storey and a central one crowning the top of the second. The outer wall of the temple is also profusely embellished with continuous bands of terracotta panels, specially the scenes of Radha-Krishna and the Hindu epics. There are also some more temples, which could not be grouped in the above classification of temples. Their structural designs are different and a combination of chala and ratna type temples.

Folk Art:

Symbols provide human beings with a means of conveying complex ideas through representation. Symbols are context sensitive and their meanings can vary greatly depending on the culture and time period within which they appear.

Alpana or creation of ritual art is one of the essential components of Vratas. This art is known by different names in different parts of India. In Uttar Pradesh it is referred to as Chauk-Purna, Rangoli in Maharashtra and mandna in Rajasthan. In Bengal and Barak Valley it is known as Alpana. The word Alpana is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘alimpana’ which means to paint or plaster with the fingers. Alpanas are made by applying rice powder paste with the finger to the walls and floors of the practitioners home. There are no written text or textual guidelines for how Alpanas should look. However there are elements which traditionally appear in them and are passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Some scholars have analysed the significance of Alpanas as decorative, representative and illustrative. According to the decorative analysis, Alpanas depict objects desired from performing Vratas. According
to this analysis, certain elements depicted in alpanas have no religious or magical
importance and are created for aesthetic purposes only. According to the representative
analysis, Alpanas are a visual reflection of what the devotee desires to gain from the
Vrata. This analysis states that the Alpana related to a Vrata must clearly depict the
object the devotee desires to have, otherwise its performance will be meaningless and
impossible. According to the illustrative analysis, they depict scenes from the Vrata
story. But alpanas are constructed as part of a ritual that is used for the promotion of
auspiciousness and the fulfillment of stridharma. In Alpanas different designs are used
like plant designs, flowers and vines. Plant designs are used in Hindu iconography to
represent the Goddess, growth and fertility in general whereas vines are associated
with growth. Sacredness of a particular thing or image depends on the context on which it
is used. Simply depicting a deity does not make an image sacred. Rather it is sacred
because it is used as a part of a ritual. Since Alpanas are constructed as part of a ritual,
they can also be analysed as sacred images. Auspiciousness is a useful category for
analyzing alpanas because of the relationship between auspiciousness, dharma and
Vratas.

The Kachari Architecture:

The Kacharis may perhaps be described as the aborigines or earliest known
inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley. While a chronological analysis of the origin and
development of architecture under them is not possible due to the lack of source material,
the three Kachari capitals at Dimapur (Nagaland), Maibong (North Cachar Hills) and
Khaspur (Cachar District), representing three greatest phases of the Kachari architectural
activities, may help us to built some concrete ideas about their temple architecture.
Dimapur retains the earliest evidence among these three sites. It contains several
megaliths of religious origin. The ruins of Dimapur show that at that period, the Kachari
had attained a state of civilization considerably in advance than that of the Ahoms. The
city of Dimapur was surrounded on three sides by a brick wall of the aggregate length of
nearly 3.5 km while the Southern side was bounded by the river Dhansiri. On the eastern
side, there is a fine solid gateway which still exists. It has a pointed arch and stones
pierced to receive the hinges of heavy doors. The style of the gateway with its carved
battlement, its narrow pointed arch over the entrance, and its clumsy octagonal corner
turrets, all exhibits characteristics elements of the style of muslim brick architecture in Bengal, which flourished in the 13th to 15th centuries.  

By the middle of the 16th Century C.E, the Kacharis established their second capital at Maibong, a hilly tract deep inside the rugged area of North Cachar Hills. Ruins of several-temples are seen here, but the only structure with architectural feature that has survived here from the Kachari period is a small rock-cut temple beside the rivulet Mahur. Constructed by the Kachari king Harish Chandra Narayan in about 1721CE, as mentioned in an inscription on the body of the temple, this structure resembles a typical Bengal do-chala structure. The temple was carved out of a huge rock of black sandstone with a fairly commodious plinth area of rectangular dimension. However, the structure, in spite of its perfect outer features of a do-chala temple, including provisions of doors was not hewn out into a chamber with a floor inside, but remained a solid monument to be treated as a shrine by itself and not as the abode of an image or religious symbol. This rock-cut small building is a prototype of the thatched vaulted roof buildings found in Assam.

Khaspur in the district of Cachar is the third capital of the Kachari Kings. Here, they formally and fully converted themselves to Hinduism though the process of Hinduisation had begun when they had been ruling from Maibong.

One of the important remains of architecture at Khaspur is the Snan Mandir or the bathing temple of the deity. It is a square building having doors on all sides. The temple is erected on a square plinth with vesara dome found in the Rajput architecture with cornices on sides around the dome. The dome is topped with a conical cap. It possesses four door openings on its four sides. The overall impression of the Sikhara along with its cornice is that of an Islamic architecture. The provision of wide doors on all the sides gives an impression that it was not a temple dedicated to a deity, but was used temporarily as a place of worship on some days of religious festival. The association of the word snan (meaning bath) indicates that it was used for the ritual of washing the deity, either regularly or on some ceremonious days. The tank beside which this temple is situated must have supplied holy water for religious purpose. Architecturally, the structure does not exhibit anything of merit, save for the bulb which has been executed with near precision. The doors are not provided with any footsteps to
reach the floor inside, indicating that the whole structure was used as an altar for a deity. The simplicity of the superstructure and the gorgeousness of the bulb bear out Islamic influence.\textsuperscript{21}

The other prominent remain at Khaspur is the Ranachandi temple.\textsuperscript{22} It is a brick-built structure with thick walls and four planed carved roofs. The roof is constructed with pan tiles made with baked earth in the shape of a half bamboo with its inter-nodes scooped out. Two such tiles were placed side by side longitudinally along the slope of the roof on timber rafters with their concavity facing upwards and over the longitudinal joint was placed another similar tile with its concavity downwards. Joints were flushed with lime and surki mortar. The whole tiled roof was covered over with a thick plaster of lime and surki beaten down slowly. This method of roofing the house is definitely a tribal style and taken from the process of roofing the houses by the indigenous Kachari people. The roof of the building is flatly domical. The door arches bear the influences of the Bengal Muslim style of architecture. But the lintel above the door is plain forming a contrast to other temple architecture.\textsuperscript{23}

About two kilometers from Sonai, a mofussil town about 16 kilometres away from Silchar, is situated Sivatilla. It is an isolated hillock with an elevation of roughly 50 metres from the surrounding paddy fields. On its top lies two brick structures. The main temple enshrines a Shivalinga and the other structure is known as Nandimandapa lying at about 15 metres south of this temple. The two structures face each other.\textsuperscript{24}

Though architecturally most simple of all the structures built by the Kacharis, these temples possess an outlook entirely different from the others. The ground plan of the Siva temple measures 3.87 metres \times 3.14 metres. The temple-structure rests on a pista measuring 7.13 metres \times 6.60 metres with a height of 72 cms. In elevation the vimana consists of a simple pabhaga of smaller height, a jangha divided into two halves by a prominent bracket-like bandhana and a pyramidal sikhara without any mastaka. The talajangha is smaller in height than the uparjhangha and is plain in appearance. Except for the façade of the temple, each wall for the uparjhangha portion contains two rectangular niches of large dimensions, each of the niches being inset with another rectangular depression with a pointed arch. The façade of the temple is designed in the form of three niches of the above type. The niche in the centre contains the door opening and the two
smaller niches flank it. From the two stone inscriptions on its east wall we may assign
the construction of the temple to the Kachari king Krishna Chandra who built it in 1788
C.E.\textsuperscript{25}

In spite of being a small and simple structure, the Shiva temple at Sivatilla exhibits some novelty among the other Kachari temples of the Cachar district. While the bada with the niches approaches the traditional Hindu method, one can notice here the avoidance of the Islamic or Bengal methods, which dominated the other Kachari architecture.\textsuperscript{26}

The Nandimandapa is a small structure, rather, the smallest temple known till date among the masonry structures of Assam in existence. In plan and elevation it is like the Siva temple mentioned earlier. It differs only in outer decorations. The whole of the bada of each wall of the temple is provided with a two-tiered niche with a half round curvature for its top. The pista of the temple measures 2.93 metres 2.93 metres 53 cms. While the base of the vimana measures 1.24 metres 1.24 metres. It has a bada of 2 metres and a pyramidal sikara of roughly one metre high. It does not possess any feature of special merit.\textsuperscript{27}

The Kachari temple architecture did not develop into a major building art during any period of history.

**The Islamic architecture:**

When the Ahoms were consolidating their power in the Brahmaputra valley, a broad area of Assam including modern Kamrup, Dhubri, Goalpara and Karimganj districts would constitute the eastern region of the Bengal subah under the Turko-Afghan rulers.\textsuperscript{28}

The religious architecture of the Muslims contains two types of buildings, i.e., Mosque and Rowza or tomb. According to religious need the essential parts of a mosque in India consist of a Western Wall containing a recessed alcove called mihrub in its centre denoting the direction of Qibla or direction towards Baitullah, the House of God at Mecca; a mimbar or pulpit on the left side of the alcove structurally in the form of stairs and a tank in the open courtyard for making ablutions.\textsuperscript{29}
In Assam, early extent of mosques are only in the form of remains. In Brahmaputra valley remains of these form of mosques are found in Dhubri and Kampup district. But in Barak-Kushiyara valley, numerous sites with ruins of mosques in the Karimganj district alone have began to show attention of the scholars. In the area under the Karimganj Police Station alone contains the remains of as many as three mosques. But as no archeological excavation has hitherto been undertaken, nothing can be said with certainty about the architectural features of these edifices except about one situated at the village Suryadas near Kaliganj. The mosque near Kalinganj in the Karimganj district is in a very fragmentary condition. Only the four walls with a corridor in the front, with octagonal corner turrets are visible. An inscription written in Arabic carved on a piece of black stone was also found there. According to this inscription the mosque was built during the reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah in the month of Shaban of 909 H.H (1501 CE).30

5. Ibid
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
12. Tapan Chatterjee, Alpona: Ritual Decoration in Bengal (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1965)
14. Ray, 42
17. See Plate No. vii
19. See Plate No. viii.
22. See Plate No. x.
24. See Plate No. xi and xii.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ahmed, op.cit, Pp 165
29. Ibid, Pp 166.