

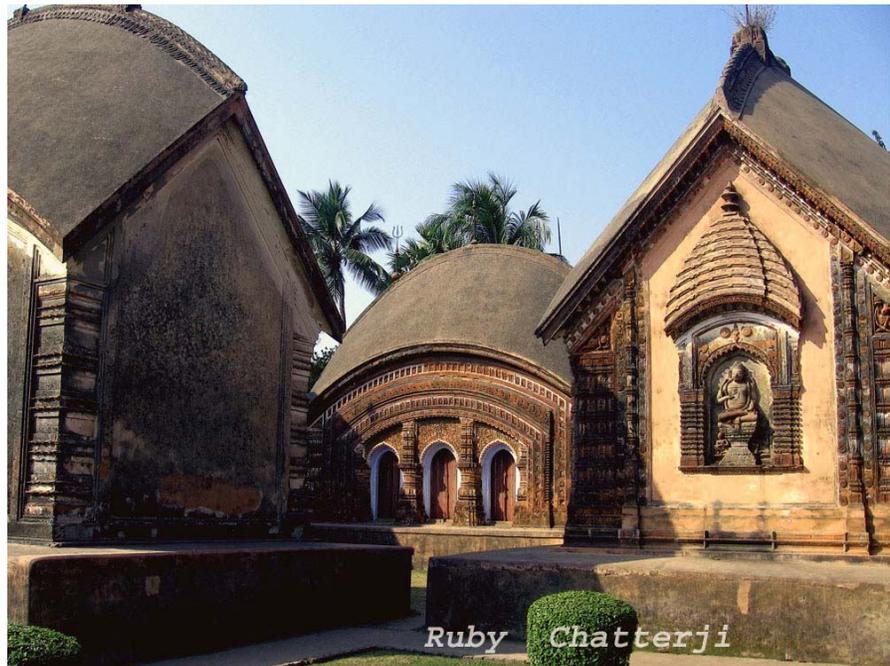
Art and Architecture of the Temples of Baronagar, Murshidabad

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It was a pleasant morning in February 2010 when we visited the Baronagar temples. A couple of hours of boat-journey along the Ganges brought us from a 'ghat' near Hazardurai, Lalbagh to that of Baronagar. After a short climb to the shore, the magnificent sight of neatly kept four-temples complex—famously known as 'Char Bangla'—came into our view. More were to follow.

Baronagar temples were built under the patronage of Rani Bhavani of Natore, now in Bangladesh. Rani Bhavani was a personality to reckon with in 18th century Bengal. The few temples which survived ravages of time stand out as a reflection of her achievements among the best ones of Bengal. It is said that Rani Bhavani wanted to build 108 temples here at Baronagar on the shore of the Ganges to lift the status of this



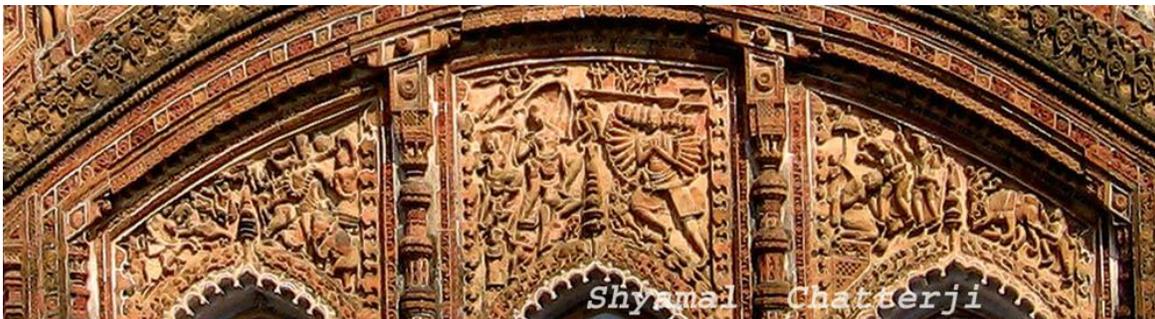
View of Charbangla complex from entrance. Temples on the right and in front have extensive and exquisite terra cotta work. Temple on the left has remarkable work of lime and mortar. The 4th temple, not visible in this frame, has simple terra cotta motifs on its walls.

settlement to that of Varanasi. She stopped at 107; I have not heard any story about the reason. Was it financial? Or, she felt Varanasi's stature should not be breached or even equaled. Researchers about Rani Bhavani's life may have the answer.

Among the major surviving temples here, we found that five temples are in 'good' condition—very likely because of restoration efforts of ASI and CAST. Bhavaniswar

temple is in 'average plus' state whereas a smaller temple just opposite to this temple with commendable work is dilapidated. Three temples have major work of terra cotta and two temples have major work of lime mortar. A few among the terra cotta wall-reliefs are quite well-known, whereas some others have not received much recognition. The lime & mortar reliefs have not yet been published much in the web.

It will be my endeavour to present a fair section of good artwork from our collection of photos. One point I want to emphasize on: during the 2010 visit, I noted that the wall-reliefs in lime and mortar were not properly cleaned, thus reducing their appeal to viewers. But to discerning visitors, who collect photos of temple art of India seriously, these wall-reliefs are invaluable. There are a few more temples at Baronagar—no significant art-work can be found and no genre could be traced.



Most famous wall-reliefs of Baronagar. On the right—Kali in battle. At the centre—Ravana's last prayer. On the left - Krsna slaying Kansa and also rogue elephant Kubalaya.

There was one very noticeable trend among the team of artists Rani Bhavani engaged. They often presented work of art with a 'different' view point. These temples are more than a century younger than Shyam-Raya or Jor-Bangla temples – there was a noticeable effort to stand out from predecessors in Bankura and Bansberia or a contemporary temple in Rajsahi. The prominent examples are the wall-reliefs on the very first temple of 'Char Bangla' complex. "Last prayer of Ravana" is the most famous among the wall-reliefs of Baronagar. Here we see Ravana occupying the right half of the 'canvas', whereas Rama and Lakshmana share the left half with others. We also see adult Krsna in a combative mood slaying Kubalaya. I have not come across any



Krsna plays the flute while standing under a 'kadamba' tree. Radha stands on his left, a garland in her hand. A gopi or a 'manjaree' on his right. She carries a pot of water. A very distinct style of human form in the lime & mortar temple'

above-the-arches display where Krsna-in-combat has been depicted. Krsna's defense against Kansa's demons during his childhood at Vrindavan—as given in the 10th canto of *SrimadBhagavat*—is most common and it has been presented in smaller wall-reliefs. Presence of 'Shaktas' among the team is very evident from a wall-relief showing huge 'Kali in battle' on an arch and from numerous smaller 'Shakti' wall-reliefs in both the terracotta temples in 'Char Bangla' complex.

The lime and mortar wall-reliefs in the left hand temple of this complex present a large 'Kurukshetra' scene above one of the arches—again very uncommon on a temple of Bengal. Above the other two arches, we find 'Kali in battle' as well as scenes from the *Ramayana*. These works are interesting for study in aesthetics. The lines of the figures on this temple are so unique that even a common Radha-Krsna scene looks interesting and very different from those in terracotta wall-reliefs.



Kurukshetra scene on lime & mortar. Not common among terracotta temples. On RH, Arjuna & Krsna. On LH. the warrior on Kaurava's side. Not identifiable - perhaps Karna

The terra cotta temple opposite to this one has many interesting works too. So has the small Gangeswar temple – an exquisite example of *Jor-bangla* construction. This temple, in a cluster with other smaller ones, is a distance away. One has to go past Bhavaniswar temple and Baronagar residence of Rani Bhavani—now dilapidated and partly occupied by her descendents. Perhaps it



Gangeswar temple, built in 1753 AD, is of Jor-Bangla construction. Major terracotta works have been crafted artistically on the pillars at the entrance and lower panels.

was not as large and elegant as her residence at Natore. Coming back to Gangeswar temple, I shall mention that the space above the arches have no scenes from mythology – only horses and designs. This is quite in contrast to the Char-Bangla temples. But the temple's pillars have details of Krsnaleela and Ramayana which deserve one full article.



RH column of Gangeswar temple. The artistry of wall-reliefs is very apparent.

The tall lime and mortar Bhavaniswar temple is remarkable for two reasons. The roof of this octagonal temple looks like an inverted lotus and it has a corridor, decorated with large floral motifs, around the inner sanctum. There are figures on the space above

the arches too; these may be interesting to historians, but they cannot be reckoned among the best work of art at Baronagar.



Tallest lime and mortar temple at Baronagar, Built in 1755 AD by Rani Bhavani's daughter Tarasundari. Inverted lotus-like dome of this 18 M tall temple and a circular corridor around the inner sanctum are note-worthy features. Human figures on the outer facade are average. The floral motifs on the outer wall of inner sanctum are excellent.



The temple diagonally opposite to Bhabaniswar temple on the dirt road leading to Gangeshwar temple is in a dilapidated condition. But, a closer watch will reveal this beautifully crafted lime and mortar wall-relief. Siva, playing his damaru, rides a bull. Pramathas are around. Two beautiful flower motifs decorate the wall-relief. This temple deserves care from ASI.



Baronagar temples have many depictions of Shakti which indicate a section of the priests here were in tantra. Here we find a lotus and two buds. A snake rests on the lotus. Devi's right knee rests on the snake's head whereas her left foot rises from water. She has four hands with heavy ornaments. She has raised her upper hands in varadamudra, her lower hands hold onto something. Her two female companions rise from water-level too. The one in her right side has flowers in her hand while the one on left side fans with a chowrie. This wall-relief had intricate work - now a lot lost to erosion.

Before I round up the presentation on the temples of Baronagar, I must add highlights of Rani Bhavani's life and achievements. She was born on 1716 AD and died on 1795 AD when she was 79 years old. She was married to Raja Ramakanta, 'zamindar' of Natore of Rajshahhi district, now in Bangladesh. She became a widow at 32. She ran her 'zamindari' smoothly, handling her relationship with East India Company well, with able assistance of her Dewan Dayaram. She was a person of austere habits. Her philanthropic activities earned her a good name. She and Rani Ahalyabai Holkar are remembered with respect till date for their patronage to Varanasi. The traders' town Azimgunj got a prominent place in the archeological map of Bengal because of her developing this one to temple town Baronagar.

Notes

1. Ziagunj and Azimgunj are now well-connected with Calcutta by rail. Berhampore is more well-known to tourists for night-halt not only for rail connection but also because it offers good options of hotels.
2. My suggestion is Manjusha Hotel at Lalbagh right on the bank of the Ganges. Close to Hazarduary and an active 'Ghat', one can cover a lot from this hotel.

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Shyamal Chatterji is an Engineer by profession from IIT, Kharagpur (Mechanical Engineering, 1968). Presently, he is retired from professional life. He is now working on the iconography of terracotta temples of Bengal. He is also associated with PANIIT and actively supports the IITians for ITI Project. His works can be viewed in: <http://przmm.blogspot.com>, <http://tctob.blogspot.com> & <http://hubpages.com/shyamchat>. Email: shyamalchatterji@gmail.com
