

In Search of the Temples of Daspur

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My first visit to Daspur was in September 2011. The fact that there are several temples having exquisite terracotta panels on them scattered over such a huge area in the Midnapore district of West Bengal was enough to arouse my interest. Having read some books on Daspur and consulted some knowledgeable friends, I decided to venture the area. As per David McCutcheon "Daspur was one of the leading centres of temple building in 19th century". The Artisans who built up these temples used



Picture 1: Ekratna Gopinath Temple, Daspur



Picture 2: Terracotta Panels on Gopinath Temple

to describe themselves as Sutradhara Temple Builders. In 1975, backed up by Gurusaday Museusem, Ranen Chattopadhyay made a documentary film on this artistic tradition of Daspur. Once upon a time in the history around 150 Sutradhar families used to stay at Daspur.

The settlement of Daspur falls within the area of Daspur Thana (Police Station). My intention was to trace out as many as temples possible within this area of

Daspur Police station and document their present conditions. I planned to visit Daspur first and then trace out other localities within the Daspur Thana. It was evident that I would need multiple visits to find out all the temples. I also suspected some of the temples may cease to exist due to rapid urbanization in the area. In this article, I will describe my visit to Daspur. Maybe in the future I will narrate my experience of further visits to the other areas of Daspur Thana.

Accompanied by ex colleague Sudipta Ghosh, I took an early morning local train from Howrah heading for Panshkura. From Panshkura a comfortable bus journey of around two hours took us to the settlement of Daspur. However, the biggest problem we faced there was that nobody in the bus stand had any clue about the existence of any terracotta temple in the vicinity. I enquired giving reference of name of the temples and their nearby locations. To my dismay, everyone's face looked blank.

In the end, I approached an old rickshaw puller and asked him if he knew any old temples in the vicinity. The guy replied in the affirmative and I asked him to take me there. Soon after passing some small by lanes we reached in front of an *ekratna* temple inside an enclosure which was total covered with trees and undergrowths. The temple was near the hospital and the high school. On enquiry I came to know this was indeed the 1716 built Gopinath Ekratna temple of the Singhas. The Singha family who lived in the adjacent house allowed us to go inside the enclosure.



Picture 3: Pancharatna Radhagobinda Temple, Dihibaliharpur

The front side of this temple with triple arched entrance was fully decorated. It was sad to see that due to sheer neglect the panels have worn out with the passage of time. The base panels had double rows and the wall panels adjacent to the entrance had double columns. In the arch panels I could see several scenes from Ramayana. However the most interesting was the presence of a terracotta lion on the arch panel. In the base panels interesting sculptors included *Firangi* soldiers relaxing, armored horses and soldiers marching with firearms. The columns in the entrance showed several scenes from Krishnalila. The door of the temple was made of wood with some decorations. It

was a common factor in many of the temples of Midnapore. The Sutradhar Artists used to refer Ekratna temple as *ãlgochtungi*.



Picture 4: Terracotta Panels on Radhagobinda Temple

Taking a cue from the descendant of Singha Family, we proceeded towards Dihibaliharpur on the same road. At one place, we had to leave the main road and walk down on our left into the fields. From the main road it was impossible to predict that there were any temples in the vicinity. But surely enough there was the South facing Pancharatna temple of Radhagobinda (1798). The temple has been freshly painted. The portion of Terracotta has been painted with red paint and the walls were painted with light yellow lime. I could see some the paint already falling off. There was a Nabaratna Rashmancha of Radhagobinda (1827) adjacent to it, which was in a dilapidated stage with no terracotta as such on its walls.

There were terracotta decorations only on the façade and on the wall panels of the Pancharatna Temple. Out of the interesting terracotta work on the façade, there were scenes of Lakshmana cutting nose of Surpanakha and Suparsha bird attacking Ravana when he was fleeing away with Sita. Later I found that these two were very common terracotta work in the temples of Daspur. Other interesting artwork included a Shadabhuja (Six armed) Gouranga with Gour Nitai adjacent to him, and several

scenarios of Krishnalila. Among Krishnalila sequences, the Kaliadaman scenario is worth mentioning.

The Pancharatna belonged to the Goswami family. We met one of the descendants of the family who was pretty thrilled to see visitors. He spoke about his ancestor Pathak Goswami who spread *Vaishnva* religion in Daspur. We visited the memorial of Pathak Goswami.



Picture 5: Brajaraj Kishore temple with no Terracotta left

Adjacent to Dihibaliharpur was Baliharpur. We are pretty disappointed here. First we could not locate the 1757 built Ektratna Genriburi temple. The locals could not help here. Secondly we could

locate the BrajaRajKishore Ektratna (1772), but it gave us a rude shock. The owner of the temple was the Roy family. One of their senior descendants said to us that since the walls of the temple were not in a good shape, they decided to demolish the terracotta panels, cement it and paint it with red! They blamed the Government for not supporting them financially. There was a small Nabartana Rashmancha nearby. The pinnacles were shaped like 'Rasun' (Garlic) and were locally known as "Rasunchura" by the Sutradhar artists. There are several such Rasmancha in the Daspur Thana area. Taking a look at it we left with a heavy heart.



Picture 6: Nabaratna Rasmancha, Baliharpur

We returned back to Daspur and headed to Nandipara. At Nandipara we could locate the flat roofed temple of the Nandi family inside an enclosure. Such flat roofed temple in Daspur was termed as "Chandni" by the Sutradhar artists. Though the temple was in an extremely bad shape, the establishment date was clearly visible on its wall. It read 1226 in Bangabda (Modern Bengali Calender) which I calculated to be 1819. There was no terracotta left, but the pillars in the triple entrance were again a hallmark of the temples of Daspur. Locally

known as “Kalāgechhyā”, they have been described by David Mccutchion as “19th century pillar with smaller pilasters around it (Gothic: composed or clustered pier)”. In the interiors we could see false doors with *Pankha* (Stucco) decorations on the Lunette (semi-circular wall area above the door).

Perhaps one of the best instances of Terracotta work at Daspur is the temple of Laxmi Janardan (1791) of the Pal Family. This 40 feet high temple is located adjacent to the “Chandni” of the Nandy family. Repair work was going on the roof of the temple and bamboo ladders were fixed in front of the structure. The present owner of the temple, Nabakumar Pal said that despite visits by representatives of State Archeology Department, no effort has been taken at State level to maintain this heritage work of art. At present the roof is in a bad shape and water is leaking inside the structure which can damage the idols of the deities. Hence he is doing the repair work at his own expenses. He was hoping the State Archeology would help him sooner or later.

The presence of the bamboo wall gave us an



Picture 8: Terracotta Panels of Laxmi Janardan Temple, Daspur

Terracotta works on the wall of this temple had amazingly intrinsic details. Some of the work was similar to temple of Dihibaluharpur, but the precision is of much superior quality. There are several scenes



Picture 7: Kalāgechhyā Pillers, Chandni of Nandy Family, Daspur

opportunity to climb up and look at the terracotta work at a close level. The establishment date of the temple was engraved very prominently showing both Old Bengali year (Shakabda) and Cuurent Bengali year (Bangabda). Like the Pancharatna temple of Dihibaluharpur, the Laxmi Janarandan of Daspur had terracotta only on the façade and wall panels. The interior area was large and spacious.

I noticed that the work was similar to temple of

from Ramayana and Krishnalila. Worth mentioning are of a giant Suprasa bird engulfing Ravana's Chariot, Dhanyamalini (2nd wife of Ravana) dissuading a passionate Ravana from terrorizing Sita, Ravana posing a Sadhu asking for alms from Sita, Krishna in boat with Gopinis, Bastraharan by Krishna, etc.

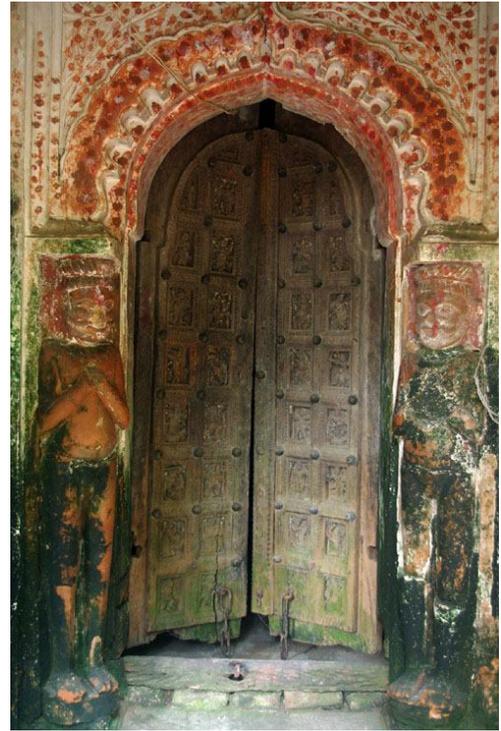
Like many other temples of Midnapore, this temple also has a wooden door, but the wood work on the door is worth mentioning. Each of the doors is divided into 16 panels. In each panel there is a wood crafted idol. Though the woodwork has been eroded severely with the vagaries of time, yet they can be still identified. For example, I could spot a Shadabhuj Gouranga. There are two Terracotta *Dwarpal* (Guard) located on each side of the door.

There was a huge *Dolmancha* inside the enclosure of the temple area. Counting its last days it was in a total dilapidated state. Coming out of the temple courtyard, I noted with curiosity that once there used to be some kind of decorations on the outer wall of the enclosure which had a somewhat square shape. Those have been long ago dug away from the wall, at present only the damaged mark remains. Besides these structures small square shaped spaces were dug in the wall. These looked like *Kulungi* where oil lamps were placed in the night.

It may be worth mentioning that on my subsequent visit to this temple in April 2012, I



Picture 10: Chandni and Shivalaya, Laoda



Picture 9: Decorated Wooden Door of Laxmi Janardan Temple, Daspur

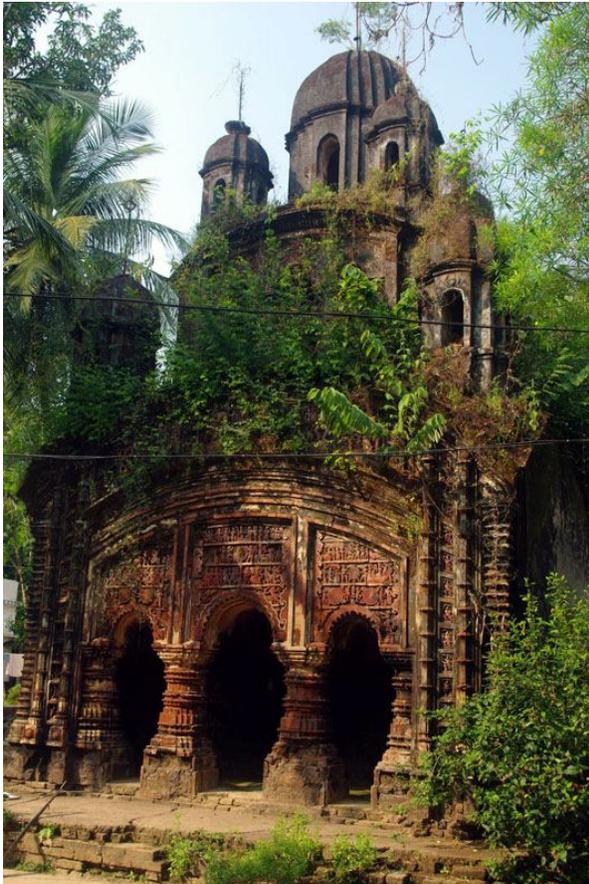
found it to be repaired and freshly painted. On enquiry I was told that it was done at the owner's personal expenses and no help came from the state.

It was 1:15 by then. Not sure whether I should consult my list of temples and continue for another

round of search, I asked our friend the rickshaw puller whether he is aware of any other temples in the vicinity. He said he knew of a temple in Radhakantapur and another in Laoda. Out of these two Laoda was accessible by rickshaw. We promptly decided to pay a visit.

Once again we came back to bus stand. Our rickshaw crossed the road and took a right turn. After a few minutes ride we turned left into another lane. Progressing further we came along another structure on our right. It was a small Chandni with two Aatchala Shivalya on its each side. From my notes, I could place the locality as the garden of Sriram Singha. The Chandni had a single entrance with two windows on its both sides with a flight of stairs. The other entrance of the structure led to a bathing ghat, where now people wash clothes and utensils.

From the plaques on the wall of the temples we



Picture 12: Pancharatna Temple of Banka Roy, Laoda

understood that it was built by Gostachandra Mistri in 1910 (Bangabda

1317) and belonged to Sri Nader Chand Guin. This was one of the last works of Sutradhar Artists of Daspur. I looked with curiosity at the Shivlayas. Each of the Shivlayas had the statue of a life sized woman standing in front of a door. Made of *Pankha* (Stucco) these statues are another unique feature of Temples of Midnapore. These were referred as "*Batayanbartini*" and could be seen in many temples in the vicinity. The floral design just above the statues had a distinct European Style. On the top of Chandni structure there were statue of two lions with a headless figure.



Picture 11: "Batayanbartini" on Shivalaya, Laoda

We continued our journey towards Laoda. We checked the Bhootnath Temple

first. This was a flat roofed temple with several round pillars around it. The temple was freshly painted with red paint. No terracotta was on its wall.

Our last and final destination was impressive. The 1801 built Nabartana temple of Banka Roy with triple arched gateway of Laoda was worth a visit. However it was disappointing to see trees growing on its upper wall which has and would evidently damage the temple to a considerable extent.

There are some large figures playing musical instruments on the cornice of the temple. Due the growth of trees on the upper portion of the temple, it is difficult to locate them, but still I could spot a few including one playing a *Dholok* (Indian drum) and another a Violin, the later being an European influence. On the wall panel there are several idols of Bishnu's *Dashavatar*. On the central façade I could locate some Hindu Gods like Bishnu, Bramha, Ganessa and Kartikey. All of them could be seen on their *Bahana*. With the vagaries of time, Bramha's face was severely damaged and Bihsnu's *Bahana* – Garuda was headless. There were few erotic scenes on the panels, some involving animals.



Picture 13: Terracotta Panels on Pancharatna Temple, Laoda

It was 14:00 now and we were feeling extremely hungry. Not sure whether we can get some good eateries in the vicinity we headed back to the bus stand. There was a decent eatery where we had a sumptuous lunch. We left Daspur around 15:00, and this time the journey was not enjoyable as we covered the two hour journey standing in an overcrowded bus to Panshkura.

Since my first visit, I have made several journeys to Daspur area and will continue to do more in the future. I have 'discovered' many of the temples, some of which exists,

some demolished and some counting their last days. Good news is that a few has been undertaken by State Archeology and I hope the list will increase.

References

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2. *Late Mediaeval Temples of Bengal* by David McCutcheon
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