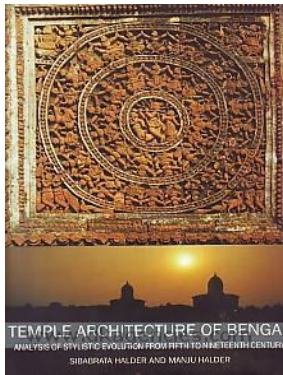


Book Review

Temple Architecture of Bengal

Analysis of stylistic evolution from fifth to nineteenth century

By Sibabrata Halder & Manju Halder



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Review by
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Editor

Temple architecture of Bengal by Sibabrata Halder and Manju Halder is an interdisciplinary attempt at understanding various forms of architecture that came into being out of various cultural matrices right from the 5th to the 19th century AD. It is very difficult however to cover the areas of such a long period in a single book of 272-odd pages, and a very well-planned methodology is to be adopted for this. That the authors took considerable care regarding the methodology is evident from the Preface, where the authors writes that the book “aims at analyzing stylistic evolution of Bengal’s temple art during last and half millenniumⁱ”. So readers should not expect a “volume of annotated historical account of the temples in Bengal nor a comprehensive document on architectural analysis of present temples in Bengalⁱⁱⁱ”. Rather the author decided to present “little more clear ideas” about the temples of Bengal from interdisciplinary perspective. I use the word ‘interdisciplinary’ quite consciously because though writing on the topic of architecture, the authors tried to understand the area/s by incorporating the insights from other disciplines. One example of such perspective can be found in the follow excerpt:

The delicate temple structures in their developed forms were not only the homes of deities; they were also carefully planned complex structures which functioned at multidimensional levels—spiritual, mythical and symbolic, as a metaphor... symbolically the temples were believed to represent a form of heaven on this earth and ‘Vastu-Purusha-Mandala’ diagram was most appropriate and compact model for it, representing the structure of the cosmosⁱⁱⁱ.

This approach can also be detected in the arrangement of the topics to reach at better understanding of the complexity and variety of temple architecture. There are six chapters, which have been further divided in various topics. The authors start with metaphysical and theological foundations that justify the aesthetics principles behind the construction of temples in honour of gods and try to connect it with the larger Brahmanical culture emerging as a result of “religious syncretism” between the Aryan and Dravidian cultures in pan-Indian perspective. However, this attempt to understand formation of structure in terms of the ‘Aryan’ values and norms ignores that point that Bengal had already got complex indigenous culture with its own world-view and ethos before the Aryan invasion

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and the amalgamation and had certain aboriginal views of its own about the place of worship—which was mainly natural in nature, forest, groves, trees etc.; and even they raised structures in the form of mounds and megaliths. The authors have taken note of the impact of geology and climate of the land on the architecture; but it could have better to explore—though a very difficult task, the correlation between the aboriginal forms of structure and 'Aryan' forms.

However, the stronger portions of the book are the following chapters: "Temple Designs and construction Principles" (Chapter III), "Buddhist Architecture in Pala Era" (IV) and "Pre-Islamic Hindu Temples" (V). Since the authors hail from specialized disciplines, they have been able to analyse the architectural principles in details with diagrams, pictures and even sometimes satellite images. They have also dedicated considerable portions to explaining certain oft-neglected topics like the role of temple craftsmen or *sutradhars*, building materials (bricks, stone, terracotta, stucco). Quite rich in analysis is Chapter IV, where a holistic approach is taken to unearth the glorious heritage of Buddhist Architecture in Bengal. Discussion of layout plans of Sompura Mahavihara and Jagajjibanpur Buddha Bihara deserves to be mentioned.

Though they have discussed Buddhist architecture in details, they have not covered the Jain tradition with much importance in view of the fact that Jainism was widespread even before Buddhism took its roots and many Jain structures are standing still today with all variety and richness. In Chapter V the authors discuss certain pre-Islamic structures including some Jain temples but rather in a cursory manner and more space could have been allowed. In the last chapter "Bengali Renaissance Architecture" a very large area has been taken up for analysis and naturally justice cannot be done to the varied and complex forms of architecture that came to be constructed after the Muslim period. But once again, analyses of the architectural principles, especially the layout plans, of the selected temples add value to the book.

The designing and layout of the book is quite good: typography is quite praiseworthy and many large colour photographs in good quality paper compliment the text very well. Having said that, it must be pointed out that there are some typos and sometime some photographs are found wrongly captioned and layout of the photos too could have been more professionally done. It can be hoped that the errors would be rectified in the next edition. Overall, it is a collector's edition and people interested in the subject would definitely find it worth the price.

Notes

ⁱ Preface, *Temple architecture of Bengal* by Sibabrata Halder and Manju Halder, pp. VII-VIII.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. IX

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. VIII

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