



Chitrolekha International Magazine on Art and Design

ISSN 2231-4822 ♦ www.chitrolekha.com ♦ Email: editor@chitrolekha.com

Volume V, Number 1, 2015

Themed Issue on

“Visual Culture in the Indian Subcontinent”

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The Raghunathji Temple at Alangiri

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The village of Alangiri is near the town of **Egra** in south Medinipur. Although somewhat isolated and difficult to reach now, it must have been a prosperous village in the 19th century as evidenced by the several terracotta temples were built here then. Exceptional amongst these is the **Raghunathji** temple built by the Das family in **1810**. Placed on a high plinth within the walled courtyard of the family's residence, this massive **navaratna** temple has triple-arched porches on three sides and is nearly **40 feet high**, making it one of the largest temples in Medinipur. To the north of the village is the Radha Gokulanandaji temple, an ekratna deul with an atchala attached jagamohana porch. Local tradition assigns this temple to the mid-18th century. Also in this village is the Bhairabnath Siva deul temple which can be dated to the 19th century on stylistic grounds. During my visit to Alangiri in 2013 I was only able to locate and photograph the Raghunathji temple.

The Raghunathji temple has recently been extensively **renovated** and painted but it retains many of its original and remarkable architectural and decorative elements. The turrets on its upper storey are fine **rekha deuls** and the stucco decoration on the arch panels of the upper shrine is crisp. Large terracotta figures and rampant lions, all modeled in the round, are placed on the parapets, some of which are perhaps original, but the **Ashokan lion capital** placed above the central facade is certainly a new addition! Subsidiary structures in the courtyard include a flat-roofed Siva temple. This **dalan** has a single-arched entrance surrounded by a row of very unusual Sakta panels. Just outside the compound walls is Raghunatha's octagonal navaratna **rasmanch** which has a large terracotta frieze of the raslila below the cornice, stucco patterns on arch panels, and large terracotta figures on some faces, but its renovations and repainting are overdone.

The **arch panels** above the main, east entrance to the Raghunatha temple are remarkable. Each panel has upto **nine** registers each containing a multitude of scenes from the Ramayana (left arch), Krishnalila (centre), and Chandi Mangal (right). Such extensive **narrative sculpture** on the arch panels is very rare. Most terracotta temples have three registers in these panels while in larger temples the number of registers goes up to five. The nine registers here allowed the sutradhars to depict a multitude of scenes from each story, in particular the Chandi Mangal story which is perhaps not as extensively covered in any other temple.



Nava Ratna



Raghunath Temple

Inside the porch the single arched entrance to the sanctum is flanked by (now brightly painted) **dvarapalakas**. At the apex of the entrance arch is an intricate medallion surrounded by delicate stucco vegetal and floral scrollwork. Surrounding the entrance are deep rectangular niches with large, fully modeled figures. Across the top is the **Rama abhisheka** scene: Hanuman holds up the seated figures of Rama and Sita while Rama's allies and attendants pay respects. Niches along the sides contain figures of Krishna and the gopis. Unfortunately, these large finely modeled figures are also coated in thick paint, **obscuring** sculptural detail.



South Wall



Main East Facade

The north and south sides of the temple are also extensively decorated. On each side is a triple-arched entrance porch with engaged clustered columnettes (*kalagachheya*) with corinthian capitals. The arches here are doubled and ornate, their finials terminating in a large medallion filled with scrollwork. The medallion and the arches are framed by a raised floral band that also outlines the rectangular arch panel which contains fine stucco **geometrical patterns**. Above the arch panels is a narrow frieze with small medallions

and then a cornice, above which are framed niches containing images of **musicians**: men and women playing cymbals, violins, and drums with an image of a *bhuta* amidst them. The west side is closed but also has ornate arches and medallions above the three false entrances. Above this are a series of niches with a mix of grotesque and erotic figures.

Ramayana Scenes on the Left Arch Panel

Temples to Rama as Raghunatha often have Ramayana as the main theme on all and especially on the central arch but, surprisingly, this is not the case here. The **Ramayana** story is depicted here above the left arch. It starts to the bottom right of the arch with Lakshman cutting off Surpanakha's nose. The next scene to the left of the arch is Rama shooting **Maricha** disguised as a golden deer. The next scene (above) shows Lakshman taking leave of Sita in the forest hut to search for his brother. Then, above this, Ravan approaches the hut **disguised** as a yogi-mendicant with blow-horn, and Sita has come outside the hut to offer him food. And then he abducts her in his flying chariot that the valiant Jatayu tries to **engulf**. The figure of Hanuman is shown standing next to a tree perhaps observing the abduction. Next a **despondent Rama** is shown beneath a tree bewailing Sita's loss and Lakshman stands beside. Below this, Sita sits beneath a tree in the Ashoka grove in Ravan's palace while a rakshasa stands guard. The scenes in the next panel are ambiguous but probably show events from the *Kishkinda kanda* where Rama and Lakshman battle various demons like Kabandha. At the centre of the next panel is probably the scene of Rama shooting **Bali** while Sugriva watches from the far right. Particularly fine in this panel are the figures of the **drummers** on the left.



Left Arch Panel

In the next panel the scene moves to the battlefield in Lanka and the episode of Lakshman wounded by Indrajit's arrow. The vanaras **extract the arrow** from Lakshmana's body while Rama holds him. The next panels shows Hanuman returning with the life-giving **Sanjeevani** herb from Gandhamadan mountain and, perhaps, a cured Lakshman. Next to this is a rare depiction of Hanuman emerging from the belly of a

crocodile. Kalameni (a rakshasa disguised as a sage) shown here seated on a pavilion met Hanuman at the foot of the Gandhamadan mountain and asked him to bathe in the lake there before climbing the holy mountain, knowing well it was infested with crocodiles. The next register above is the climactic **battle** scene: Vibhishana, Rama, Lakshman and a vanara on the left, and a Rakshasa, Ravan, Indrajit, and a drummer on the right. Next is the well-known story of various methods used to wake Ravan's brother **Kumbhakarna** from his slumber. Methods included trampling by an elephant, tickling him in the ear, and playing loud instruments: drums, cymbals, and horns. The register at the top is also a rarely depicted scene of Ravana slain, his ten heads severed, his lifeless body streaming blood. His wife **Mandodari** sits despondently next to him, holding one of his severed heads in her lap. A figure of a woman lying down next to this could be Mandodari but this is not certain.

Krishnalila on the Centre Arch Panel

The **Krishnalila** in the registers above the central arch start at the bottom left with Krishna killing **Bakasur** by tearing his beak apart. Above this seems to be the climactic scene of Krishna pulling Kamsa down from his throne. Across from this is the **Sakatasura** episode where the infant Krishna kills the cart-demon, shown here with heads and arms emanating from either side of a row of wheels. The register above this shows several episodes: on the right Krishna kills the demoness **Putana** while Yashoda tries to restrain him. Next is the **Daan Lila**, where a seated Krishna tries to extract a toll from the gopis while old Barai Buri scolds him. Then Krishna battles various demons: He emerges from the python Aghasura, confronts the elephant Kuvalyapida and, perhaps, the horse Keshi. The next register starts with Krishna being **bathed** by the women of Gokul with pots of Yamuna water and then **dressed**: a peacock feather is inserted into his hair. Next is a rare depiction of the child Krishna as **Anantasayini** lying on the coils of a serpent while a woman, perhaps Yashoda at his feet. Also unusual is the next story. Yashoda holds Krishna and Balarama by their hands, perhaps punishing or scolding them. Then a fine image of Yashoda seated on a hexagonal platform, facing the viewer and cradling Krishna's head to



Centre Arch Panel

look into his **mouth** where, the story goes, she sees the whole universe and everything in it, including herself looking into Krishna's mouth.

The next register seems to have several unrelated scenes, starting on the right with Yashoda tying Krishna's hands as punishment. Next, Krishna is in a shrine-like **swing** pulled by the women of Gokul. Then Krishna shows Yashoda his divinity through a vision of him playing the flute as Vishnu, with Siva and Brahma on either side. Next Krishna overpowers another of Kamsa's demons in a wrestling match next to a palm tree. The next register starts with the **Cheer Haran** leela: a turbaned Krishna sits on a tree while a row of nude gopis stand below. Next to this is the rarely depicted **Krishna Kali** lila. Radha's husband has heard about her illicit rendezvous with Krishna in the forest. He arrives on the right, sword in hand but finds Radha worshipping Kali which unknown to him is actually Krishna in disguise. The next register shows a seated couple, perhaps Nanda and Yashoda, flanked by guards while two gopis petition to them, perhaps complaining about Krishna. Next is the scene of Krishna and Balarama's **Mathura Gaman** in a chariot driven by Akrura, while the gopis and women of Gokul wail and faint in despair. Next to this is another uncommon scene: Krishna and Radha **worship Kali**. The next register starts with Krishna lifting the **Govardhan** mountain and then possibly the scene of Radha's **manbhanjan**: Krishna apologizes and pleads with a disconsolate Radha. The next scene with several women around a seated king is uncertain. The remaining two registers are well-known scenes: the first is of the **raas-leela**: Krishna multiplies himself on a moonlit night, so he can dance with all the gopis. And finally at the top is Krishna and Balarama with their unruly flock of cows and calves.

Chandi Mangal on the Right Arch Panel

The registers above the right arch narrate the story of **Chandi Mangal**, a tale that became popular in 19th century Bengal and is particularly common in temples built by **merchant-zamindars**. Most temples show one or two important scenes from the story, but here the entire story is depicted in considerable detail. The narrative starts at the bottom left of the arch-panel with the merchant **Srimanta** invoking the goddess Durga before he starts a journey in search of his father **Kaliket**. Durga appears to him, shown here seated on his boat. Then in the register above Srimanta's mother Khullara is shown **giving him** to the goddess, and then Sreemanta starts his journey with **prayers** to the goddess: he stands with folded hands on the boat, while his boatman raises his hands in worship. The next register above starts with Srimanta's **vision** of Kamale Kamini in a storm: she is seated on a lotus and swallowing an elephant. Then are shown men (guards or warriors) riding an elephant while another strikes a gong. They are perhaps the king's men who meet Srimanta when his boat arrives at **Ratnamala ghat**, as shown in the next register. The next two panels, one showing a **bird** seemingly diving into the water, and the next showing Durga with a group of men and women are uncertain.

The next register, however, is a beautifully depicted scene of **King Shalibahan's** court. The raja is shown seated facing the viewer on a throne while his attendants hold a parasol, offer him a **hookah**, and fan him with a punkah and a fly-whisk. To the right is a queue of three people, perhaps petitioners, and finally an armed guard. One of the **petitioners** is Srimanta who tells King Shalibahan of his vision of Kamale Kamini. Shalibahan demands to see it and **promises** half his kingdom and his daughter if Srimanta's story is true, else it is the **executioner's sword** for Srimanta.

The next register is the main scene of the Kamale Kamini story. The deity is shown at the centre seated on a **lotus** and holding an elephant on her knee. She is flanked by two lotus roundels probably indicating that she is **hidden** from view. To her left King Shalibahan is seated with his attendants on his elaborate boat but seems **unable to see her**, while on her right Srimanta on his boat with his attendants see the goddess and try to draw attention to her. But the promise is **unfulfilled**, so Srimanta is led away to be executed, in the register above, his hands **tied** in a rope and with armed guards. So he prays to Durga, shown here knee deep in **water** praying, and the ten-armed Durga appears seated on a lion and grants him Shalibahan's daughter in marriage.

The next register shows the marriage with pot-bellied men perhaps **Brahmins** seated on elaborate chairs, and a series of men and women blessing the couple who are shown on the right, standing in front of the covered **ritual fire**. The last register above shows Srimanta with his wife **departing** in the boat to return to his home.



Right Arch Panel

Wall Panels

Pairs of wall panels are placed along the sides of the facade and arched above the entrance. They are flanked by **full-height pilasters** on the sides, while at the top shorter pilasters divide the panels into groups of six. Most of the higher panels along the sides and across the top are repetitive, each panel showing a **pair of figures**: one with matted hair and one arm raised, the other holding an astra over his shoulder, perhaps Saivite

sadhus. But the lower wall panels that are at or below eye level base have varying themes. Some have **dasavatara** in pairs: matsya and kurma in one panel, varaha and narasimha in another, vamana and parasurama in one, and balarama and rama in another.

Other panels show more lilas of Krishna: riding on an elephant composed of nine gopis (**Navanarikunjara**), milking the cow, wearing an anklet, killing the bull-demon Aristasura, hand in the pot of butter that Yashoda is churning, and liberating the two **sons of Kubera** who were trapped in the Arjun tree to which Yashoda tied Krishna. Other panels show a goddess seated on a lotus holding an elephant (perhaps Parvati as Ganesh-janani), four-armed goddess on a lion (perhaps Jagaddhatri), and the **trio** of Jagannath-Balaram-Subhadra (seen increasingly in 19th century temples). Many panels have **Saivite** scenes: Saivite devotees preparing bhang, a Sadhu seated wearing a knee-band, and sadhus with intricately tied jatas. Also familiar is the scene of **Shakuntala** feeding leaves to a deer in the hermitage. Less certain are the two panels at the top of the second group below: one showing a figure perhaps Krishna seated on a tree with heads of other figures around him, and the other showing a figure seated on a galloping **horse** but facing the other direction.



Corner Panels

The triangular panels at the top corners of the temple facade usually vegetal scrollwork, often with a single large figure, mostly that of a fantastic yali eating flowers. Here the corner panels are also unusual in being divided into **three registers** that contain rows of projecting figures. The registers on the left corner panel are of peacocks eating snakes and men who hold snakes or drums or rosaries, and dancing women (women holding peacocks were a common theme in 19th century temples). The registers on the right corner have an erotic scene of a **couple** seated on a projecting platform. Other figures are of men and women dancing or playing drums and cymbals in front of more peacocks.



Left Corner



Right Corner

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