A Tower of Mystery: Jatar Deul

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In the middle of the nineteenth century land surveyors stumbled upon a towering brick structure in the midst of the Sundarban. The structure was surrounded with dense forest and was itself covered with thick vegetation. So who constructed the temple in the heart of one of the densest forest in the world? What was the purpose of construction? When was it constructed? Was this part of a remarkable civilization that once flourished in Southern Bengal? Although historians are unable to come up with any concrete conclusion, they have shared their opinions.

Satishchandra Mitra in his book Jassore – *Khulnar Itiash* has described the temple as a watch tower of Pratapaditya. Kashinath Dikshit initially described it as a Mughal period architecture but later on described it as an Oriya architecture dating back to days of Lingaraj and Konark. In 1914 the then head of the Eastern Region of ASI, J F Blackistone initially described the structure as "timeless" but later on said that the structure dated back to Pal–Sen era of about 1000 AD.

A copper plate found near the temple in 1875 suggests that Raja Joychandra constructed the temple in 975 AD. The plate has long been missing, but its presence has been confirmed by eminent Sundarban historian Kalidas Dutta. Absence of any other historical records on Joycahndra has still kept the historians in the dark.

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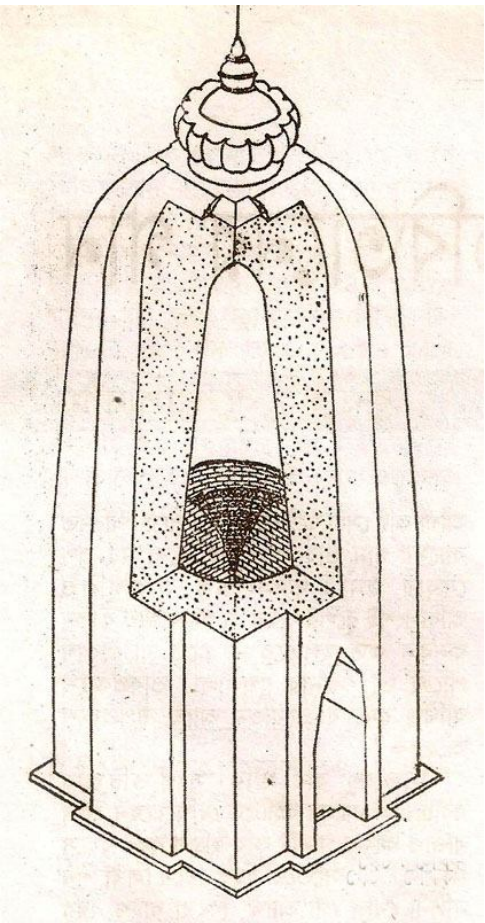
Jatar Deul doesn't follow the traditional Bengal style of Chala or Ratna, but follows the Oriya style of towering spire, 'Deul'. The temple is long abandoned but the locals believe that it once housed the deity of matted haired (Jatadhari) Shiva and hence the name "Jatar Deul."



The base of the temple is a square measuring 25.5 feet. The inner sanctum is also a square of side 10 feet 8 inches and is located 4 feet 3 inches below ground level. The inner sanctum contains five kulingis. The spire follows the corbelling method (bricks arranged in steps) but the exact height of the temple cannot be found as the original spire was damaged by an Englishman who was searching for some hidden treasure. The spire has been rebuilt but sadly it doesn't match the grace and beauty of its former counterpart. The walls of the temple were intricately decorated with decorative bricks, but sadly most of it is lost due to unplanned reconstruction.

My first encounter with Jatar Deula happened on an Early December afternoon of 2004. The journey was no easy one and with almost no information on the web or in print it was almost a venture into the unknown.

My initial train journey from Sealdah (South) to Diamond Harbour went on smoothly. It was followed by a bus journey on route No. 10 bus to Raidighi. The distance was not great but the bus stopped at regular intervals for prolonged period to pick up passengers and after two hours of bus journey I finally arrived at Raidighi.

Now the really adventure began, as I boarded a motorized country boat (locally called *Bhut–Bhuti*) to cross the Moni River. Although Raidighi had a boarding platform Kankandighi, on the other side of the river, didn't have one. I got down from the boat several feet away from the bank, with shoes in my hand and my jeans rolled well above my knees. After wading through knee deep water and mud I finally made it to hard ground.

The boat ride was followed by even more perilous motor van ride, through a winding brick paved road. The journey lasted about an hour and the last 15 minutes were rewarded by a spectacular view of the towering structure of Jatar Deul. The temple complex containing the lone towering Deul surrounded by eucalyptus and banyan trees.

Although the temple has long been abandoned and declared a protected site by ASI, pujas are carried out regularly and the inner sanctum contains images and idols of Shiva, Durga, Kali and several other Gods and Goddess.

Almost six years later I chanced upon a book titled *Dakshin 24 Pargana Jelar Purakirti* by Sagar Chattopadhyay, elaborately describing the historical and archeological sites of South 24 Parganas district.

There was detailed description about Jatar Deul and it also contained information about a horse race that happens next to the Deul on 2nd Baisakh (Mid April). This was enough to ignite my passion and on 16th April 2011 I was out to witness the horse race with the strange mysterious temple in the backdrop.

In this six years lot of changes took place: the Moni River was bridged and there was no need to get your legs dirty. My friend Amitabha Gupta accompanied me and we boarded the Lakshimkantapur Local from Sealdah (this is a better option than Diamond Harbour). We got down at Mathurapur Bazar, in 2 hours, and boarded an auto to Raidighi (1 Hour) followed by a motor van ride across the newly constructed bridge to Jatar Deul in another 1 hour. Only to know that the horse race has been postponed to 25 Baikash (9 May) because of Elections.

Amitabha and I decided to retrace our steps back to Jatar Deul for the illusive horse race. On 9th May we repeated our 5 hours long journey only to be informed that the race was called off due to unofficial reasons.

Within less than a year Jatar Deul was again on the news. The Telegraph, Kolkata dated 16 Feb 2012 reported the unearthing of a huge structure just in front of the towering deul. So was Jatar Deul just a temple or a huge temple complex?

The historical significance of the findings is also substantial, according to experts. "The discoveries point to the fact that this may have been an important pilgrimage in the Sena period (11th-12th centuries)," said Tapanjyoti Baidya, the superintendent of archaeology, ASI, Calcutta circle, who is leading the scientific clearance of the complex. Baidya also said "When we have uncovered the adjoining structures, finished conservation and landscaping, this place could be a major attraction."

So it is quiet likely that the dig at Jatar Deul will not only solve one of the greatest mysteries of Sundarban history but also turn Jatar Deul into a historical tourist spot doubling up as a entry point Sundarban, of natures great mysteries.

Note

Sketch Courtesy: Sagar Chattopadhyay

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A mathematics teacher by profession, Rangan Datta has been freelancing as a travel photographer and travelogue writer for some of the leading newspapers of the country. His travelogues and travel photographs have also been published in some of the leading magazines of the country like The Statesman, The Telegraph, Hindustan Times, Jet Wings (Inflight Magazine of Jet Wings), Discover India. He also had the opportunity of working on academic project under some of the premier institutes of the world. Please visit http://www.rangan-datta.info & http://rangandatta.wordpress.com to view his works. Email: rangan_datta@yahoo.com.